



NOVEL

4

WRITTEN BY  
**Necoco**

ILLUSTRATED BY  
**NAJI Yanagida**

REINCARNATED AS A  
**DRAGON**  
HATCHLING







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REINCARNATED AS A  
**DRAGON  
HATCHLING**

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*Seven Seas Entertainment*

## HARUNAE DESERT

### ILLUSIA

A hero that's said to only appear once every 500 years.

### ADOFF

A former Knight Commander. Currently in prison.

### NINA

Catgirl demi-human (Felis-human). Our hero encounters her while traveling.

### BALLRABBIT

A monster our hero meets in the desert. Greedy with a big appetite.

## NOAH'S FOREST

### MELTIA

A swordswoman from the Royal Capital. Brought Myria along on her journey after the two met in the village.

### MYRIA

A kindhearted girl who named our hero. Traveling with Meltia after meeting her in the village.

### BLACK LIZARD

A trusted companion of our hero. Master of poison attacks.

**DRAGON EGG**

**EVOLUTION**

**CAST**

**EVOLUTION**

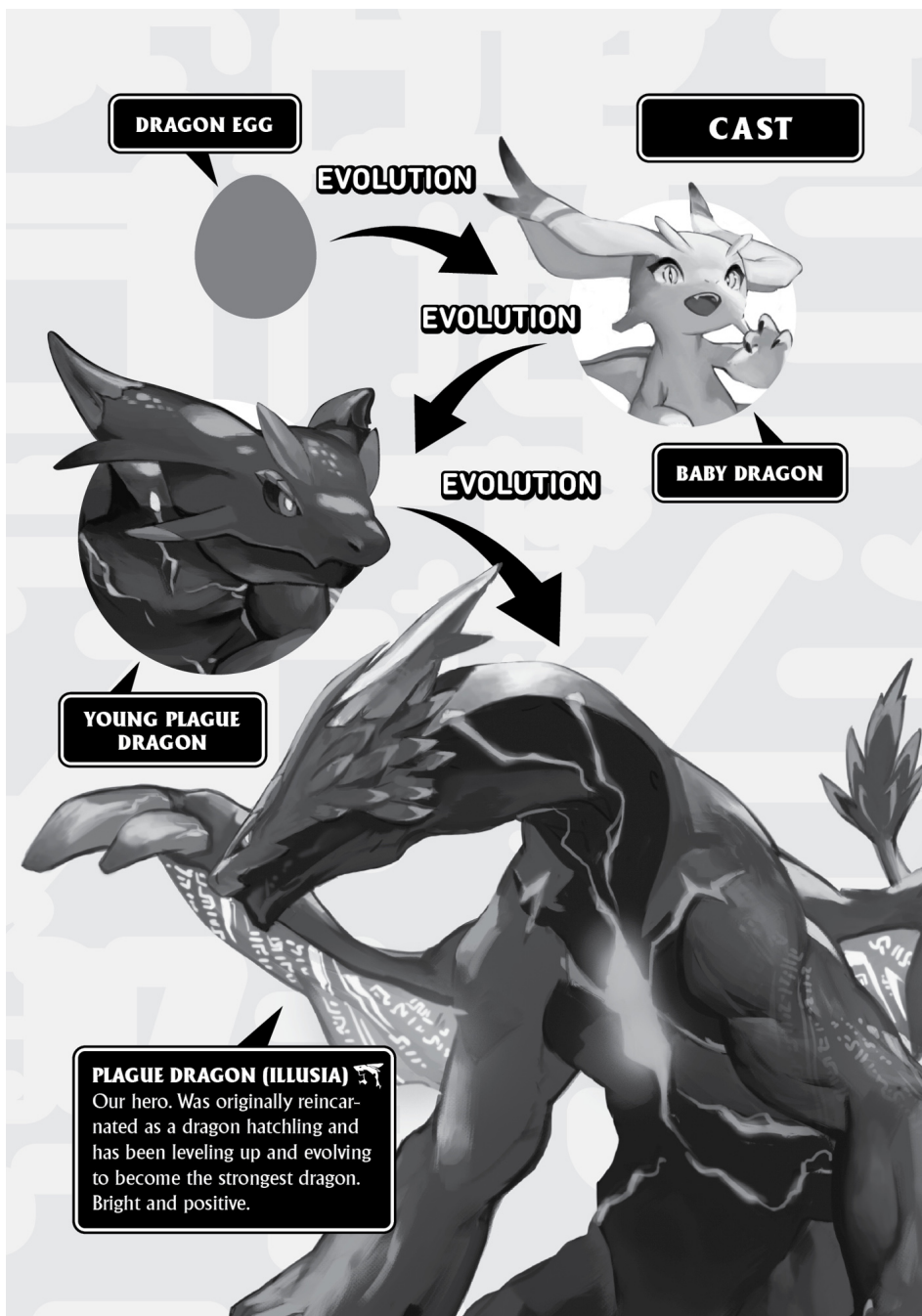
**EVOLUTION**

**BABY DRAGON**

**YOUNG PLAGUE  
DRAGON**

**PLAGUE DRAGON (ILLUSIA)**

Our hero. Was originally reincarnated as a dragon hatchling and has been leveling up and evolving to become the strongest dragon. Bright and positive.





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## THE STORY SO FAR

After  
battling the slime  
in Noah's Forest, our hero the  
Plague Dragon Illusia is washed out to  
sea. Coming to, he finds himself in a sandy  
desert stretching out in all directions.

After his comfortable life in the forest, Illusia finds  
the harsh conditions of the desert a jarring contrast. Here,  
even water is hard to come by and often filled with dangerous  
monsters the likes of which he's never seen before. Illusia wants  
nothing more than to return to the forest. When he comes across  
a small monster called a ballrabbit, Illusia saves its life and decides to  
take it along with him on his journey.

During his desert wanderings, Illusia spots a giant monster chasing a  
horse-drawn carriage. Unable to leave the travelers to their fate, Illusia  
saves a young woman named Nina—a catgirl slave on her way to auction  
in a neighboring city.

Fearing his curse will put Nina in danger, Illusia continues through  
the desert along with the ballrabbit, searching for a safe place to  
deliver Nina.

Meanwhile, back in the city of Harunae, plans are being  
laid to hunt down a Plague Dragon in the desert.  
Among the hunting party is a hero with  
a very sinister air...

Tensei Sitara Dragon no Tamago datta-  
Saikyo Igai Mezasane Volume 4  
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# Chapter 1: The Dragon's Fishing Journal

## Part 1

**A** DAY HAD PASSED since I foisted my battle with the giant centipede onto an army of red ants.

Kicking off the ground, I flew straight up until I could survey the area. I needed to find a human village for Nina. I'd never flown this high before, and I couldn't stay up here for very long, but I did my best to balance as I slowly dropped my speed. Spreading my wings to maintain my height, I looked around.

Nothing but desert for miles and miles. A pack of hyenas ran in the distance, and out at sea the water stretched endlessly, unbroken by boats or islands. The walled city was looking more and more like the only scrap of civilization out here.

Remaining at this altitude was difficult. As I descended, I spotted the leader of the soldiers who'd attacked me.

*What was his name again? Hage? Hagen, that's it. Look at him, riding one of those three-headed camels. I was worried he'd have trouble making it home safely after his horse ran off. I'm glad he's doing okay.*

I heard Ballrabbit squeak as I received a message via Telepathy. "Pfeff!" ("Did you see anything?")

I shook my head. Nina was weak. If I didn't find another village, I'd have no choice but to bring her to the walled city.

Nina watched my exchange with Ballrabbit anxiously. I needed to explain the situation more thoroughly. I'd already made it clear that we couldn't live together for very long—hence my search for a safe haven—but I hadn't told her about the Dragon Scale Powder yet.

I needed to raise my skill levels anyway. This was the perfect opportunity to use Human Transformation. *Let's see... If I use it now, how long will it last?*

***Illusia***

***Species: Plague Dragon***

***Status: Normal***

***Lv: 44/75***

***HP: 302/344***

***MP: 237/237***

*237 seconds...about four minutes. I'll be able to talk more smoothly than before, so that should be plenty. I'll make it quick and preserve some MP for later.*

I could just ask Ballrabbit to use Telepathy for me, but I was craving human contact.

"*Graar.*" I made a little noise to get their attention, caught Nina's eye, and then used Human Transformation. Just like the previous times, my body grew hot and I shrank down to human size.

Back when I was new to this, the pain and heat made me feel faint, but I was used to it by now. I just wished I could extend the skill's interval and fine-tune my appearance. I could still only turn into a lizardman.

My transformation made it clear to Nina that I had something to say. She glanced over at Ballrabbit, then took a tentative step towards me, her expression tense.

*Seriously, you don't have to be so nervous! I'm not gonna gobble you up! I wish you'd trust me more.*

"My scales, poisonous to you. Can't take you. Around for long. Wanted to take you somewhere. But. I'm not. From here. If don't find something. Soon. No choice but taking you. To walled city."

"....."

"Don't. You know somewhere? No other place, then. No choice but. Walled city." I asked her the same question as last time. She'd said she had nowhere to go, but I just wanted to check again. If I emphasized the gravity of the situation, perhaps she could come up with something.

We needed to make a decision. The walled city was some distance

from here, and if the alternative was to keep wandering aimlessly until I had to abandon her in the desert, cursed by Dragon Scale Powder and effectively sentenced to death. Well, there really was no contest.

At my words, Nina's cat ears drooped weakly. *Hey, if there was something else I could do, I'd do it. But we're out of options.*

Nina and I stood there staring at each other. My MP was draining; I had to say something.

"If. You feel sick. Please tell. Right away." From what happened with Ballrabbit, I already knew that damage to the body began before the curse showed up on the status screen. The rabbit had still pinged as normal even after it started coughing.

"Pfeff!" Ballrabbit let out a cry. Nina reached out to gently stroke it on the head. She nodded and looked back at me.

"You'll find a small port village if you follow the coast. It should be closer to here than Harunae, nyah."

That was the exact opposite direction of the walled city. Harunae? Was that what it was called? The soldiers' status screen had popped up with something like that.

*A port city, huh?* Were Nina and the other demi-humans brought to this continent on a boat, then transferred to Harunae by carriage? The port city might not treat her any better than the walled city.

"U-um, the port city is close, and I still feel fine. Can we go slow?" Slow? Was this pace too hard on her body? I thought I'd been moderating my stride. "If I go back...they'll capture me again. I want to stay with the two of you as long as possible. O-or am I too much trouble?"

"No. I. Understand. We will do. That." I took a few steps backwards and transformed back before she could finish thanking me. My body expanded until I reached my original dragon-sized form. My MP wasn't gone; that wasn't why I broke the transformation. I just didn't want her to see the tears falling from my eyes. Even back in dragon form I couldn't stop crying.

Did we have any other options? The port city or Harunae—the results would be the same. The image of that fat man laughing as he kicked Nina and the other slaves out of the carriage for monster food kept popping into my head.

I couldn't go into human villages. Wherever she went, I wouldn't be able to check on her. What if I took her to the port, and they just killed her right away? That would render all of this completely pointless. I took on the giant centipede, and for what? Saving the life of a single fat slaver.

"U-um, Mr. Dragon?" Nina spoke hesitantly behind me, but I couldn't turn around. Not yet.



## Part 2

**I** PUT NINA AND BALLRABBIT on my back and followed the coast, heading for the port city. I respected Nina's wish to enjoy a slow journey, keeping to a more sedate pace than usual. I wasn't expecting much of a view in the desert, but the ocean was really nice. Nina and Ballrabbit leaned against each other on my back, gazing out at the waves.



I craned my neck to look towards the desert, spotting a three-headed camel resting beside a cactus. *Lucky!* Some perfectly good meat just sitting around waiting for me. And it was almost mealtime too.

“Grarr.” I informed my passengers that I’d be changing direction abruptly.

Ballrabbit sent the message to Nina on my behalf.

“Pfeff!” (“He’s. Going to run. So hang on!”)

“Nyaah! Okay!”

Nina grabbed on with her arms, and Ballrabbit grabbed on with its ears. I picked up speed, sprinting towards the three-headed camel.

“Narrrghh?!” One of the camel’s heads swiveled towards me, the other two quickly following. It picked itself up and tried to scramble away, just as I leapt into the air and released a Whirlwind Slash. The sharp blades of wind cut into the camel’s body, felling it immediately. I swung my claws out as I landed, cutting the heads clean off.

**Gained 28 Experience Points.**

**Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 28 Experience Points.**

“Grarr?” *I went pretty fast. Hope you guys are okay.*

“Pfeff.” (“She said. She’s fine.”)

“Y-yes! Nyaah! Um, it was fun!”

Ballrabbit’s interpretation skills were pretty good. We were basically conversing in real time now. *You’re really bridging the gap between human and monster communication, Ballrabbit!*

This was way more like a regular conversation than the stilted, businesslike back-and-forth of Human Transformation. Now that I didn’t have to worry about my MP consumption, we could finally communicate our intentions to each other clearly.

*Agh, this is so fun, and I’m so happy! If Ballrabbit’s Telepathy skill levels up even more, we can probably get past the choppy sentences and just chat normally!*

Instead of confronting humans directly, I could use Ballrabbit as a go-between and avoid unnecessary conflict. As long as it saved up its MP.

“Pfeff.” (“Meat. Meat. Meeaaaaaat!”)

*Yeah, yeah. I just got you a ton of meat! Your interpreting services aren't cheap, buddy.*

I put down Nina and Ballrabbit, then got to work butchering the camel. I tore open its belly with my claws and removed the organs, sliced it up, and removed the pelt. I put the fat aside once I'd cut it away. The process went more smoothly every time.

I sliced into the nearby cactus, separating it into bite-sized pieces. They looked pretty neat, if I do say so myself. If I didn't have the whole Dragon Scale Powder curse situation hanging over my head, I could totally make it as a chef.

I put in real effort to plate it up nicely, because there was no telling when I'd have to say goodbye to Nina. I wanted to make her life as pleasant as possible in the interim. I only wished there was more I could do.

If I cut the camel pelt into small enough pieces, could I make thread? Maybe I could tie it around some bone to fashion a fishing pole. *I mean, the ocean is right there. Supposedly the port city isn't that far away, plus Nina says she still feels fine.* Surely it couldn't hurt to take a little detour.

Grabbing the pelt, I stripped some of it as thinly as I could. I messed up several times, but I finally emerged with a fine strip. Now I just needed the camel bones...

“Pfeff!” Ballrabbit poked its ears towards me. Drool dripped from its mouth.

*All right, all right. Go ahead and eat.* I was surprised it hadn't already. *Oh, I know. I bet it wants to eat with Nina.* When we first met, all it could think about was food, but it had grown fond of her. The two of them spoke with Telepathy, effectively leaving me out of the conversation.

Ballrabbit was a monster, but that didn't necessarily mean people clocked it as a threat. It wasn't a sure thing, but...if it was with Nina, maybe the port city would treat her better? Ballrabbit could use Telepathy, Clean, and Rest—all useful skills to win humans over. Of course...then I'd be traveling alone again.

*W-well, maybe that's for the best.* I could just focus on leveling and

Title Skills to get back on a decent evolution path. Then I'd be able to go to the human village and check on them.

“.....” Ballrabbit was staring at me. It must have read my mind. *Hey, don't just look at my thoughts like that! It's embarrassing!*

I wasn't sure if it was annoyed at my attempts to plan its future, or if it was just ashamed of eavesdropping, but it turned away from me awkwardly.

*What? If you've got something to say, just use Telepathy and tell me!*



## Part 3

**A**FTER EATING, I resumed work on the fishing rod. I made a line from thinly cut strips of fur and a pole from a leftover piece of spine. I drilled a tiny hole in the tip of the bone and then slipped the thread through. I bent a needle from the cactus to just the right size, attaching it to the line.

*Hmm...well, that's a fishing pole, I guess. Albeit a crude one. Would any fish out there even fall for it?*

"Um, what are you making?" Nina asked.

Okay, it was Ballrabbit's time to shine. I fed it, so now it could put in some work. Transcribing thoughts was difficult, but I hoped it would keep the same wording as much as possible. That way I'd feel like I was actually talking.

*"P-pfeff..."*

I used my tail to rouse Ballrabbit from its after-lunch catnap. *Sorry to wake you, but can you tell Nina I tried making a fishing pole?*

*("Tried making. Fish. Pole.")*

Hmm. The Telepathy speech was still stiff, but I guess there was nothing I could do about that. I wished there was. I wanted it to sound more natural.

"A fishing pole?" Nina tilted her head to the side. Wow, did it look so bad she couldn't even tell what it was? Or maybe not. Maybe she didn't know what a fishing pole was, period. Maybe there weren't rivers or oceans where she came from.

*"Graar."*

*You drop the hook part into an ocean or river, and when a fish bites onto it, you pull it up. Where I'm from, all sorts of people go fishing for fun, not just fishermen. You should try it sometime, Nina!*

*"Pfeff." ("Make it. Shorter.")*

*O-oh, sorry. I just got excited.*

*("Fish bite hook. Pull up to catch. It fun. You should. Try.")*

*Man, that's heavily edited. It doesn't matter as long as it gets the point*

*across, but I don't want her to think I'm being short with her. I'm fine with you summarizing, but be a little warmer!*

"May I borrow that?" Nina asked after hearing the explanation. She was staring at the fishing pole, her eyes gleaming. *Guess she is interested.* I remembered Nina's stats contained a hunting skill. Maybe she was into stuff like this?

*Go ahead, go ahead! I'm not going to use it, so feel free to take it to the port city with you. You'll have plenty of chances to use it there. Though I guess you could find a better-made fishing pole...*

I'd used View Status on plants before; would it work on tools? I gave it a try.

**Bone Fishing Pole: Value F. Due to its cobbled-together nature, the thread is thick and the hook is large.**

**Easy to bait, but the hook is incredibly obvious.**

*Hey, that's a harsh critique. It's the thought that counts, you know!*

I picked through the camel's entrails, forming little balls of bait.

*Can we actually catch anything with this? It was my idea, but now I'm anxious. For starters, are there even any fish in this world's ocean? Maybe it's swarming with weird monsters instead.*

Nina imitated me, happily making balls of bait. It was too late to voice my hesitations now. I should've checked the ocean first. How could I face her if we didn't catch anything?

Ballrabbit gathered up meat chunks too, rolling them into balls with its ears. It shoved them into its mouth. *Hey, that's not helpful!*

I wrapped the bait in a scrap of fur to make it easier to carry, before handing the sack and the pole to Nina. She looked out over the ocean. "Leave it to me! I'll catch our dinner for tonight, nyaah! I'm going to be helpful!"

*O-okay. I appreciate the sentiment, but don't stake your happiness on it. I'll feel awkward as hell if you don't catch anything, don't take it so seriously. Ballrabbit, can you use Telepathy and let her know it's okay if it doesn't work out?*

"Pfeff." ("He says. I'm counting. On you. If you don't. Catch enough for. Dinner. I'll eat you. Instead.")

"Nyaah?!"

*Ballrabbit! What the hell is wrong with you?! I said to reassure her, not threaten her! Nina's trembling! This is no time for your sick jokes!*

*"I-If I'm not good enough, then..."*

*Take it back! Ballrabbit, hurry up and take it back! Now she thinks it's life or death!*

Luckily, Nina took my freaking out as an assurance Ballrabbit was joking around. She gave me a relieved smile. We headed to the water's edge to fish. She was so excited she could barely sit still, face flushing as she looked out towards the water. She was a catgirl, so did she super love fish? Maybe that was only a stereotype. I had vague memories of being disappointed when I discovered that between fish and beef canned food, cats would more often come running for the beef.

*Please let the ocean contain fish. I'm gonna feel so guilty for putting pressure on her if she comes up empty...*

## Part 4

**W**HEN WE DREW CLOSER to the shore, Nina put the bait on the fishing hook. “It’s pretty obvious it’s a hook...”

“*Graar.*” I made a little noise and gestured back towards the wrapped parcel of bait.

“Nyaah? Oh, you think I should put another on?”

“*Raar.*” I nodded. Nina slid on another piece, and I couldn’t help getting a little emotional. Here I was—finally, *finally* having a conversation with her without Ballrabbit’s help.

“Are you sure about this?” She looked at me skeptically, hand wrapped around the giant ball of bait. Yeah, a fish would need to be pretty big to swallow that thing whole, but I decided not to worry about it. I gave her an encouraging thumbs-up.

She swung the fishing pole towards the water, casting the line out from the shore. The lump of bait made a neat arc in the air before hitting the water. Damn, that was pretty good for a first try. No shadows of fish in the water, though. *Ah, I see some now. Just glimpses here and there. They’ll probably come over here eventually...right?*

Ten minutes passed. No bites. Nina looked close to tears. Ballrabbit narrowed its eyes at me.

*Patience is key in fishing! Ten minutes is nothing. Still...maybe we should go further in?*

“*Graar.*”

Nina jumped, startled. “Nyaah! O-oh, it’s just you, Mr. Dragon. Sorry, I was concentrating.” I guess my sudden noise startled her.

*You’re gonna pass out if you’re this tense even when there aren’t any fish around!*

“*Raar.*” *Get on my back and we can go farther out.*

“*Pfeff.*” (“*He says. Going farther. Out. Get on. Back.*”)

*Thanks for the simultaneous translation, Ballrabbit!* I still wished I could learn Telepathy for myself, though.

“Can you swim, Mr. Dragon?”

*“Raar.” Probably... I think so, anyway. Just be prepared in case I flip over or something.*

*“Pfeff.” (“He says. Don’t worry. It’ll be like. Riding a big. Boat.”)*

*Hey! You can speak a lot more smoothly than you’re letting on. You’re making it choppy on purpose, aren’t you? Don’t make me sound so arrogant! How is Nina gonna see me? The two of you talk without me all the time! You better not tell her any lies!*

*“.....”*

*Now you’re gonna go all quiet?! That just makes me even more anxious! Please. I know I have to say goodbye to her soon; I want to do something nice for her before then.*

I put Nina and Ballrabbit on my back and headed out into the water. Once my feet didn’t touch the bottom anymore, I floated. I used my wings as oars to propel us forward.

*Hey, this is fun! I could even float while I’m sleeping; I could float us to an island! If I take Nina... No, wait, what if she starts showing symptoms in the middle of the ocean? The boat—me, in other words—would infect her.*

“Mr. Dragon! I see some! There are tons of fish a little farther out!” Nina started chattering excitedly, her ears twitching. Her eyes gleamed when she looked out at the water. Definitely the eyes of a hunter. Before this she’d always been frightened and stressed. Maybe this was closer to her true self.

No wonder she’d retreated into her shell. She was sold as a slave, came *this* close to being giant-centipede chow, and then woke up in front of a dragon. That last part was my fault, though.

Before long, I spotted the dark shadows in the water. It would be more effective to just pierce the fish with my claws, but I didn’t want to kill the fishing vibe. I flapped my wings and propelled us towards the school.

Drawing nearer, we could make them out more clearly—flat fish with light blue and black stripes. Barred knifejaw, maybe? Or something similar. They looked delicious; I hoped she caught those. Barred knifejaw were chewy and thick with fat.

*I should tell Nina to focus on those guys.* I was anxious to chat with her more, especially now that we had a common goal. I checked Ballrabbit’s MP. About halfway full.

Hmm, we'd used up quite a bit with just Telepathy. Talking through Ballrabbit was annoying, though we wouldn't have to do it much longer. We would probably reach the port city by tomorrow. I had no idea when Nina would start showing symptoms of the curse. It was strange that she hadn't already. Maybe Ballrabbit caught it so fast because it was so tiny back then. And I guess there could be something else in Nina's biology that wasn't reflected on the status screen.

I *really* hoped she wouldn't get sick, but there was no use dwelling on it now. I shouldn't waste the time we had. Once we arrived at the village, she'd be out of my reach. This was my last chance to spend time with her.

"*Graar.*" I made a little noise and stopped. All of a sudden, one of the big striped fish split in two.

"*Gichi, gichi!*" Another fish leapt above the bisected one. It was the size of a fat sea bream, but way freakier. A sickly vibrant green with bulging, bloodshot eyes. Its huge, prominent fangs did *not* look like they belonged on a fish. The fleshy remnants of the striped fish clung to its jaws.

*Was that really a fish? Its face looked like a frog that got run over!* I scanned the water, looking for the grotesque creature. I saw the two halves of the striped fish sink down towards the bottom of the ocean. Blood spread as its guts spilled out.

"*Pfeff! Pfeff!*" ("*There's a lively one!*")

*You didn't have to use Telepathy for that. I saw it! And I don't care if it's lively or not, I'm not eating it! It might even drag Nina under if she doesn't hook it properly! Besides, now that I know it's lurking down there, I don't want to just float around.*

"This is perfect! Watch, Mr. Dragon!" Nina whipped the pole enthusiastically, casting the line out far. Should I stop her? Well, there weren't *too* many fish, so it was probably okay...I hoped. And I didn't want to back out now. "Wow, a group of fish are already crowded around the bait! Look! Look!"

My attention was far more focused on her twitching kitty ears than what was going on in the water. Had they always moved so much? Anyway—that froggy fish just sliced the striped fish in half without eating it. Maybe it just liked killing. It *did* have the face of a murderer. Wait—it had flesh stuck in its teeth. Maybe it only ate innards...oh.



Come to think of it, the bait was made of innards too!

“Nyaah! I got a bite, Mr. Dragon! It feels huge! Wh-what am I supposed to do now?!”

*“Graaar!” Toss the whole pole into the ocean or it’ll be too late!*

My roar startled Nina, and the pole started pulling her instead of the other way around. The weird fish flew through the air, its huge mouth open wide and its bloodshot eyes bulging. *“Gichiiii!”*

A cactus spine stuck out from under its eye. If only that yank had pulled it out, but too bad...it looked like it was wedged in there deep. Its teeth gleamed dangerously, and it glared at Nina like it wanted her dead. Clearly, it was ready to attack.

“I caught one! I caught one!”

*“Graaaaaaar!”* I lifted my upper body, with Nina and Ballrabbit letting out little screeches and clinging to my back. I lashed out at the lunging fish, skewering it on my claws.

*“Gichiiii!”* The fish screamed, gnashed its teeth weakly one last time, and went still.

**Monster’s rank is too low to gain Experience Points.**

*So it is a monster.* I dropped back into the water, catching the rogue bait with my opposite hand. I twisted around and handed the weird monster fish and pole back to Nina.

Nina stared at the fish, confused. “U-um...what just happened...?”

Took her long enough. How did she space out so much she didn’t notice that thing until just now? Anyway, I’d promised to let her enjoy her fishing trip, and I intended to stick to it. I didn’t see any other dangerous fish around.

*“Raar.”*

*We should kill the fish as soon as we catch them. They’ve got lots of veins by their gills, so a good slice should finish them off. Nina could probably do it with her claws. Fish suffer if they’re out of water for too long, and if they’re stressed they get hard and won’t taste good. After that, you just turn them over and drain the blood, then wash them out in the ocean. Is that too long, Ballrabbit? Can you translate?*

*“Pfeff.” (“Kill fish. Right away. Cut them. On gills. Or else. Taste bad. Flip over and. Drain blood. Wash salt water.”)*

“O-okay!”

*Hey, you made it way too short! You didn't include all the important facts! Why are you so obsessed with food?*

Nina removed the hook from the monster fish, flipped it over to drain the blood, and then moved to the edge of my back to wash it in the water. *Is this fish even edible? I should check to make sure it's not poisonous or something. And if they're super common, we should get out of here.*

**Eagle Bass: Rank E Monster. A fish possessing tough fangs and bulging white eyes.**

**Commonly used as an ingredient in magical items and currently endangered due to overhunting. They are drawn to magical power and become easy to locate once certain conditions are met.**

*I don't wanna locate them! Go ahead and let them go extinct! Erase them from the earth! Who the hell's trying to meet the conditions to look for the Eagle Bass anyway?!*

I was relieved that they were rare. I doubted we'd see another one. I was looking around in the water, and there didn't appear to be any more dangerous creatures. Now we could finally focus on fishing.

Nina cast her line into the water again. I prayed that she'd hook something more normal this time. Maybe one of those striped ones the monster fish killed.

After an hour of fishing, my back was covered in gutted, cleaned fish. There was the pop-eyed, innard-craving Eagle Bass, bright and colorful guppies with big fillets, a ferocious two-headed eel...a veritable buffet of local seafood. The majority were species of fish I'd never seen in the other world, but nothing out of the realm of good sense. In the end, we caught thirty-four fish. A pretty good haul, but I had some reservations.

“Wow, Bally! You caught another!”

“Pfeff!” (*“I'm concentrating! Don't interrupt!”*)

“S-sorry...”

Ballrabbit caught almost all the fish. Holding the fishing pole *with its ears*. The only ones Nina caught were the first Eagle Bass and some little ones. She wielded the fishing rod well but was overexcited and let

the fish devour the bait whole. Probably didn't help that the fishing hook was a poorly shaped cactus needle that barely caught in the fish's flesh.

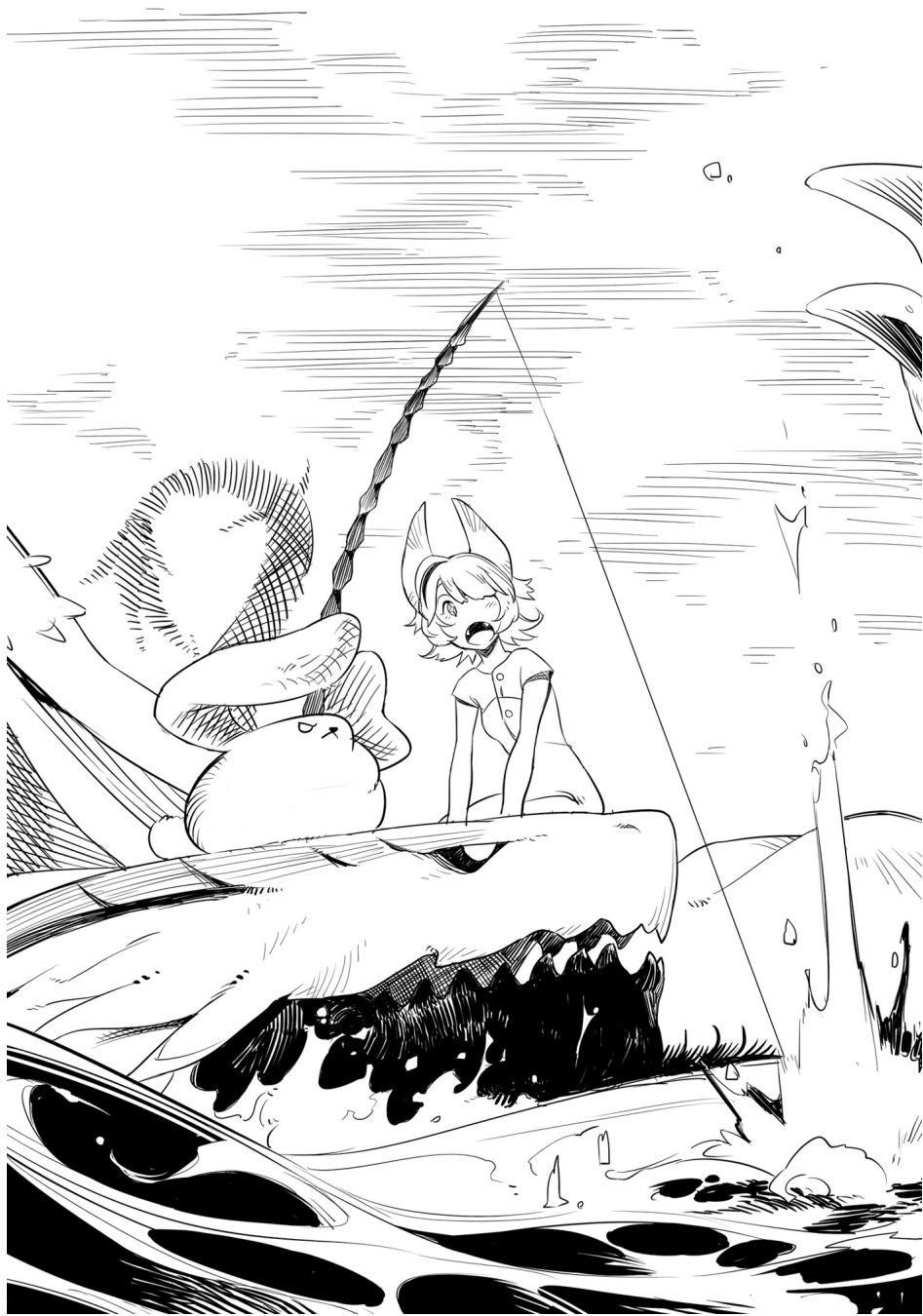
Every time Nina failed to catch a fish, her ears drooped and she baited the hook again on the verge of tears. My heart swelled with pity when she finally caught another one and it was tiny. She was so disappointed that she slumped to her knees on the spot. That was when Ballrabbit tried casting the line—and it turned out to be some kind of savant.

Ballrabbit took over hooking the fish, and Nina gutted and cleaned them. *Why did we even bother with this in the first place?*

“Wow. That's the biggest one of the day! You're amazing, Bally!”

“Pfeff! Pfeff!”

*As long as you guys are having fun, I guess that's all that matters.*



## Part 5

**W**HEN WE'D CAUGHT plenty of fish, I floated us back to shore. On our way there, I considered our next move. I wished we could predict what was waiting for Nina in the village, but I doubted we'd get the opportunity. My presence would transform it from a port town to a *ghost* town.

Arriving at the shore, I let Nina and Ballrabbit down off my back. They spread the camel's skin out on the sand to lay out their catch, and I cooked the fish with Scorching Breath. Thinking about it, this was my first taste of seafood since arriving in this world. We could probably eat them raw, but I decided to roast them anyway. Better to avoid weird parasites. Ballrabbit and I would be fine, but I didn't want to make Nina feel self-conscious by giving her a different meal.

I picked up a fish by its tail and put it in my mouth. Mm, it was good! Basically how I remembered fish tasting. The feeling that came over me was almost nostalgic.

I let Ballrabbit handle the weirdo fish. What was it called again? Eagle Bass. *Listen, you creepy fish—and this is coming from someone who ate his fair share of darkwyrms—you are super strange. Even Ballrabbit might balk at eating you. I mean, your eyeballs are bulging out. I feel like if anyone ate those, they'd be cursed.* Wait, didn't View Status mention that people use Eagle Bass for magical ingredients? I'd already roasted it, but I could save it for later. Might come in handy.

"This fish looks a bit strange, but it's *really* delicious!" I looked over at Nina and did a double take. She was eating the Eagle Bass. For real? Was she eating it because she caught it and felt like she had to take responsibility? *Listen, you don't have to force yourself.* "There's only one of them... Would you like to split it with me, Mr. Dragon? This is the one I caught!"

At least she was having fun. Did she really like the taste? I felt bad turning her down, but the only part of the fish left was its head. The Eagle Bass's bulging white eyeballs stared at me.

"Rarr..."

*Can I at least take out its eyeballs first? I'm worried I'll get a nasty*

*side effect if I eat those.*

*“Pfeff.” (He says. ‘Feed it to me. Stuff it in. My mouth.’)*

*You’re being kind of a jerk to me today, Ballrabbit! What did I ever do to you?*

*“Okay, nyaah! Here you go, eat up!”*

*H-hey! Please remove the eyeballs, at least? I mean, they made eye contact with me! I swear, they’re looking right at me! Even though they don’t even have any pupils! C’mon, Ballrabbit, translate for me! Stop her!*

*“Y-you don’t want it? I’m sorry, nyaah...”* Nina looked at me in guilty disappointment. Her ears flopped weakly.

*“...Raar.”* I relented and opened up. Nina’s face brightened, and she placed the fish’s head inside. I closed my eyes and ate it, chewing through the cheek bones as a faintly sweet flavor spread through my mouth. It didn’t look it, but it tasted sort of like roasted crab. With more gelatin, maybe, since it melted easily on my tongue.

It wasn’t bad. Guess some things could look creepy as hell but still taste pretty good. I bit into the fish’s cheek again before sensing two spherical objects spinning around in my mouth. *Ugh, the eyeballs!*

*“Wh-what do you think, Mr. Dragon?”*

*Well, it was good. It was good, but...I won’t think about it too hard.*

# Interlude: The Hero's Epic Tale Act 3

## Part 1

**E**ARLY THIS MORNING, I paid a visit to the church. Neatly sidestepping the bishop's long-winded lectures and various warnings, I collected his stamp of approval on Adoff's release permit. I understood the need for strict enforcement, but meaningless formalities were truly irritating.

Of course, these were the same idiots who spent their days dog-eared donations to funnel them to the rich, so I shouldn't be surprised. The knights were already a large force, but command continued to pointlessly bolster their numbers, further consolidating their power and frittering away the state budget. Any supposed oversight was truly a sham. The only voice of opposition was Adoff, and he couldn't do anything from prison. Change was impossible, and should a real threat emerge, I couldn't confidently say the bloated military was capable of even mounting a defense.

Here I was, traveling far and wide to risk my life for this country while these parasites grew fat off my leftovers. How many times had I contemplated throwing the church leaders over the walls to the monsters? That would liven things up. Picture it: grieving mothers weeping over the murders of their precious children while the knights fled in a panic. I could come to the rescue when everyone was already half devoured.

Still, I had no alibi and I didn't see any monsters around right now, so I shelved that plan for the time being. Besides, if I threw *everyone* to the monsters, there'd be no one around to have my back when I needed it.

I hadn't expected to leave so early in the morning, but anonymity was a condition of Adoff's release. We would don heavy cloaks and leave Harunae before sunrise. The public had already been notified of our operation. Apparently, the backlash was worse than expected. Typically, my departure would be heralded by cheering citizens. Today,



we skulked out like criminals, ordered to notify the citizenry of our victory and nothing else.

Doubtless, the public was displeased with a suspected murderer running around free. Also...there were the rumors about Adoff that *I'd* been spreading.

I imagined how that prick of a bishop must have looked when he found out—pale, shaking, beside himself with rage. It served him right. There were only so many restrictions on my behavior that I was prepared to put up with.

I picked up Adoff from the jail, and the two of us walked through town, our hoods pulled low.

“Thank you so much again, Illusia. I heard getting permission to do this was difficult.”

I nearly busted out laughing. I knew Adoff was stupid, but I didn't think he was *this* stupid. “I only did what anyone would do. If you really want to thank me, you can prove your innocence and avenge your fiancée and brother's deaths. But we shouldn't talk too much right now. The crowd will be thin this early, but it's better to be safe.” I feigned furtive glances around, hiding my smile.

As we entered a residential district, I became aware of more people around us. Adoff did too. He paused, frowning. “Should we take a different route?”

“It's going to be the same anywhere. They're onto us. I bet someone from the church leaked information about our early departure. They're not a united front.” I covered my face with my hands, feigning frustration. I was being too obvious, but I didn't care. Anything was better than letting him see my amusement.

The information leak was me, of course. I'd let slip the day, time, and circumstances of our plan. A perfect opportunity to harass both Adoff and the bishop, though my main goal was to demonstrate to the ordinary citizens exactly where I stood.

A group of three young men hurried over, pointed at Adoff, and yelled. “There he is! Family-killer Adoff!”

“We heard you deceived the hero so you could run away, but we're not gonna let that happen!” They were yelling loud enough for a crowd to form. They'd surely begun to search for us as soon as they got

word of his release from jail. Their voices woke up the sleeping neighborhood, drawing citizens out of their homes to see what the commotion was about.

“Get back in jail! Die!” Someone threw a rock. Adoff saw it but didn’t move, apparently resigning himself to getting hit. Maybe he thought that would slake the crowd’s bloodlust.

Here was as good a place as any. Before the situation could get out of control, I took a step forward and batted the stone away with my sword.

“It would seem some slight exaggerations have spread, so allow me to explain. I’ll straighten things out with the church,” I added to Adoff in a quiet voice, then took another step forward. “I asked Adoff to come along with me personally, because, despite his situation, he is the best man for the job. However briefly, Adoff was once my mentor, and, although I’m sure some personal feelings crept into my decision, no one tricked me into doing this. I am confident he was wrongfully accused of the murders of his family. In fact, Adoff is coming along with me *because* he wants nothing more than to reopen the investigation. I vouch for him with my reputation as a hero on the line. If by some chance he does cause harm while under my care, I will take full responsibility. So please...let us pass.”

I bowed my head. An awkward silence reigned as the crowd parted, one by one. “Let’s go before they regroup,” I murmured to Adoff, who was still bewildered.

“I’m really sorry,” he said as we moved through the crowd, and I laughed on the inside as we hurried along.

Now I had clearly shown my position. I’d demonstrated that I trusted Adoff. And when news of his unfortunate fate spread, everyone would assume I’d been forced to stop him from doing something drastic. Despite my words, I had no intention of taking responsibility for his actions. I was the symbol of this country—the church would do everything in its power to prevent any tarnishing of my image. Who would dare demand I “take responsibility”? The church rubber-stamped me; if anything happened, they’d bear the brunt of it.

According to Harunae law, the punishment for any crime committed by an escaped prisoner fell upon their closest relatives. I had scapegoats; nothing could touch me. People might call me naive, but that would only reflect favorably on my reputation in the end. I

wouldn't get in any trouble.

Besides, fresh-faced optimism and idealism was expected from heroes, right? No harm done.

## Chapter 2: The Hero's Attack

### Part 1

“**G**<sub>RAAAAR!</sub>” I summoned Ballrabbit from its hole in the sand.

“Pfeff.” It rubbed its sleepy eyes with its ears. I still couldn’t get over how agile those things were. I wouldn’t even be surprised to see it show up wielding a sword with them one day.

*Rise and shine. Time to head for the port city again!* Nina said it was close by, but there was nothing on the horizon. If we didn’t make it in time I would never forgive myself; I wanted to get an early start today. Once we made a bit of progress, I’d fly up and try to spot it.

Currently, Nina was inside Ballrabbit’s mouth. We’d decided that was the safest place for her to sleep. If I put

her in mine, I might swallow her by accident. *A fate worse than death, for sure.*

Due to Ballrabbit’s skill Storage, Nina never got dirty when she was in its mouth beyond the tiniest bit of saliva. Ballrabbit’s body really *did* contain some alternate closet dimension, no matter how it downplayed the size of it. According to Nina, it was a warm, comforting space. Ballrabbit’s talents were myriad. It belonged in a human city way more than a desert teeming with monsters. *Lucky thing.*

“Pfeff.” Ballrabbit let Nina out of its mouth and carefully placed her on the ground with its ears. She opened her eyes as soon as the sunlight hit her, stumbling slightly on her sleepy legs. Ballrabbit gently supported her.

“Th-thank you, Bally.” She patted it on the head. Those two really were close.

“Raar.” *Hey, Nina. Is this the right way to the port city? How much farther is it?*

She didn’t answer. *Hey, what gives?*

“Pfeff.” Ballrabbit closed its eyes and let out another big yawn.

This thing wasn't even bothering to translate for me, I could tell.

*Hey, c'mon, Ballrabbit. Do your job. What, are you still sleepy?*

*("How long. Until port city?")*

"Um...I think we'll be able to see it sometime today. I recognize that big bone." Nina pointed to a shape buried in the sand—maybe a dragon's skull. A smaller species than me, for sure.

*Today, huh?* Well, if was that close, then in an emergency I could just Roll there at full speed.

Now that I had my Protective Spirit skill up to level 7, learning white magic would be easier. Maybe I should practice Rest again. Ballrabbit already knew it, so I had a built-in teacher. And we might as well teach Nina while we're at it. If she knew some recovery magic, her chances of survival in the city rose drastically.

She might not master it in a single day, but I'd managed to teach it to myself in the forest with brute force. Just enough to heal scratches and stuff—it didn't even need to be strong enough to register in her skills.

*"Graar."*

Time to get started on my plan. *Hey, Ballrabbit. Teach me and Nina recovery magic.*

*"Pfeff?" ("Nina too?")*

*"Graar." Yeah, I just figure Rest might come in handy when she gets to town. People might treat her better. I want her to learn it before we part ways.*

Ballrabbit read my thoughts and turned to Nina. *"Pfeff." ("He wants. You practice white. Magic before. Leave.")*

*"What? B-but..."*

*Hmm. She doesn't seem very enthusiastic. I thought it was a great idea. Maybe it really isn't that easy to learn. If it were, everyone would know it. Rest is a useful spell.*

I was just making guesses; I might be dead wrong. It was late in the game to admit this, but I had *no idea* how anything in this world worked. I might have suggested something totally outlandish.

"I'm, um...w-well..." Her voice roughened, going quieter and quieter. She looked like she was about to cry. Did she have some sort of

recovery magic-related trauma?

“Pfeff,” Ballrabbit said to Nina. If it was using Telepathy, the thoughts weren’t coming through to me. Nina set her mouth in a determined line.

“A-all right. Please teach me!” Nina bowed her head. *I don’t know how to use it yet, either. I understand your confusion, but Ballrabbit’s the one who can use Rest!*

## Part 2

**N**INA AND I sat facing a pair of vultures. They were about three feet long and sported threatening talons. They were cross-eyed with huge pupils, which gave them a creepy bearing.

They were also severely injured to the point that they couldn't move, rendering them a non-threat. Just in case, we tied their wings with strips of camel pelt. I'd watched them flying towards us earlier and thought, *what a weird looking bird*, before realizing they were hurtling straight for Ballrabbit. I took them down with a merciless Whirlwind Slash. They were now missing hunks of flesh at the base of their wings.

**Harunae Condor: Rank E+ Monster. A condor native to Harunae Desert. Although weak, it is very sly and known to steal supplies from travelers. Approach with caution.**

This was the perfect opportunity to practice Rest. The last time I'd learned, I'd had Myria's wounds to focus on. I didn't want to injure any of us intentionally, hence these condors, captured alive and ready for experimentation. It counted as animal cruelty, I guess, but we had no other options.

*"Pfeff." ("Feels like. Healing wound with. Light. Push out all. Unnecessary thoughts. Excise. Worldly desires.")*

Nina and I listened to Ballrabbit's valuable guidance, then directed our thoughts towards the condors' injuries. *Everything will be fine. You already learned a makeshift version of Rest once before. Just remember that sensation and recreate it.*

If I kept practicing Rest, I could improve my evolution options, I just knew it. What I wanted most was to avoid the Jabberwock. The description of its skills was something like, "it leaves behind a mountain of corpses in its wake and invites disasters everywhere it goes." *No, thank you. I'm not turning into something like that. I'll do whatever it takes to put myself on a good path.*

*"Graar."* I let out a cry, focusing all my energy on Rest. The slightest glimmer of light appeared around the condor's wound, but it was still bleeding. I checked its status. One measly HP recovered. Closing my eyes, I thought back to when I was a baby dragon. Myria

was unconscious and fading fast. I put her down in the middle of the forest and began casting white magic on her. I visualized that moment and, when I looked back, pictured Myria instead of the condor.

“Peepyah! Peepyah!” The condor’s eyes rolled, and it gave a high-pitched screech, trying to stretch out its bound wings. No way could I ever mistake this thing for Myria. She’d probably be annoyed with me for trying. Still, reminiscing was the easiest way to recreate the circumstances.

“Graar!” I tried again, desperately attempting to trick myself into thinking this was a child on the verge of death. Light seeped into the condor’s body. The bleeding stopped and the wound began to close.

“Peepyah?” The condor stopped flailing. *Was it working?*

**Gained Normal Skill “Rest” Lv 1.**

The skill registered! My first magical skill was back in my grasp. I super wanted to level it up.

**Title Skill “Protective Spirit” Lv 7 has become Lv 8.**

*Oooh! I finally hit level 8! Protective Spirit probably helped me learn Rest more easily than I would have otherwise, as well as vice versa. Knowing Rest will level up the title skill faster. A self-sustaining loop. I was on a direct path toward Holy Dragon!*

I glanced at Nina to find her smiling happily at me. “It looks like its bleeding has stopped!” Ballrabbit, our guide, also gazed at me proudly. *God, Ballrabbit is even good at teaching? Is there anything it can’t do?*

I checked the condor’s stats.

**Species: Harunae Condor**

**Status: Bleeding**

**Lv: 7/15**

**HP: 2/22**

**MP: 8/14**

*Hey, it’s still on the verge of death! Maybe...it wasn’t bleeding anymore because it had almost run out of blood? Taking a closer look,*



it *did* seem a little worse than before. Its beak flapped, and it cried out in a hoarse, pitiful voice. This thing was totally doomed! Ballrabbit stared at it with satisfaction. *Why are you so happy, bud?* I guess if you couldn't check its status, the condor's critical condition wouldn't register.

Now that I'd made a breakthrough, it was time to focus on Nina. *I'll keep an eye on the condor's HP while Ballrabbit coaches her.*

## Part 3

**“W**<sub>H-WHAT DO YOU THINK, nyaah...?”</sub> Nina panted.

I checked the condor's status. A single Rest spell had given it 4 HP. That was a huge improvement over the earlier 1 or 2 points. It wasn't bleeding as much, either. This might not be that useful during an actual battle, but it could help with small wounds.

“Raar.”

“Pfeff!” (“He says. You’ve definitely. Improved.”)

“Y-yay! I learned magic...”

Nina staggered, and Ballrabbit immediately jumped to support her. *All that MP use probably tuckered her out. We should stop for now.* Her skills were rudimentary, but it was better to have them than not.

I untied the condors' wings and let them go. They gave each other puzzled looks but, realizing they were free, flapped their wings and flew away. Ballrabbit watched all this with a hint of frustration.

“Nyaagh...” Nina let out a pained noise. It gave me a bad feeling. She didn't sound like she was just tired from using magic. Weakly, she covered her mouth with her hand. “Cough, cough!”

This must be the first symptom of the curse, appearing before the ailment showed on her status. My plan was to use Roll at the first sign of trouble...but when she drew her fingers away, they were spotted with blood.

She looked at her hand before slowly lifting her gaze to me. “A-ahh...I’m sor—” She closed her eyes, unable to finish her sentence. Her condition was worsening far faster than Ballrabbit's had.

Maybe the effects were different between humans and monsters? Feeling panicky, I checked her status.

**Nina Nefah**

**Species: Felis-human**

**Status: Cursed (Slight)**

**Lv: 8/60**

**HP: 19/27**

**MP: 5/24**

The curse was already on her status screen! But why? Did using up so much MP make her more susceptible? Did Ballrabbit just have higher resistance to start with? I wasn't sure how the curse was transmitted, but I'd gone ahead and used one isolated case to make a judgment. That was clearly a mistake.

Still...I couldn't help wondering if something had been wrong for a while.

She looked guilty, sometimes. For no reason. A distinct awkwardness to her features. It really *had* taken far too long for the symptoms to show up.

I'd had a fleeting hope that the Dragon Scale Powder wouldn't affect her, or that she might have developed a resistance, but that didn't appear to be the case. She'd hidden her early symptoms from me. She'd pretended to be feeling fine when she wasn't and suppressed her coughs. She knew that as soon as I found out she was sick, I'd take her directly to town. And she didn't want that.

But there was still something that didn't sit right with me. Ballrabbit was excellent at picking up on her emotions. There was *no* way it hadn't known. When I tried to meet its eyes, it glanced away awkwardly. That must have been what all that Telepathy was about. They'd been talking about the curse without me. They'd been lying this whole time.

*("I'm...sorry.")* Ballrabbit curled up in a small, dejected ball.

*What the hell were you thinking?! If we don't make it in time, Nina could die!*

At this point, anger was senseless. There was no use blaming Ballrabbit. We just had to Roll to town as fast as possible.

*("There is no.")*

*Huh? What'd you say, Ballrabbit? There is no what?*

*("Is no...port city. She said. She came from somewhere. Very far away. The other. Direction.")*

*Wait, what do you mean?*

*(“Nina says. Doesn’t want go. Home. Will be same. No matter where she. Goes. And that she. Wants stay with us. Till the. End.”)*

“Graaaaar!” Ballrabbit’s ears trembled. It curled into an even smaller ball.

*Why didn’t you just tell me that? I guess...even if you did, I couldn’t have done anything.*

I had no idea what kind of environment Nina came from. I had no idea how she came to be a slave, or why. To her, being taken to a human village might be a fate worse than death. But what other choice did I have? If I was a human, I could figure something out. But I was a dragon.

“Grrr...”

If her condition worsened, she might have even tried to escape. She saw how intent I was on getting her there. She *fully* intended on dying alone in the desert.

If I Rolled at top speed, could I make it back to Harunae in time? I didn’t know how quickly the disease progressed once it showed up on the status screen. Maybe there was still hope. But this was all guesswork.

*I could use Laplace to figure this out.* I didn’t want to rely on it too much—it was shady, and I didn’t know if I could trust it. But maybe, just this once...

My biggest issue right now was that Nina didn’t want to go to Harunae or any other human village. *So then what should I do?*

## Part 4

I PICKED UP A CACTUS and carried it to the shore where Ballrabbit was waiting, keeping an eye on Nina as she lay in the ocean shallows. The desert sand was too hot. It was bad enough having to leave someone this sick in the blazing sunlight. We needed to keep her hydrated; even standing around in this climate drained stamina. Without enough water, her illness would progress even faster.

Ballrabbit took the cactus from me, wringing out the flesh into Nina's mouth. She'd paled further even in the space of time it took me to find it. *Should I keep moving, praying for a miracle? Just hope I'll run into a human or another town? Or should I take her back to Harunae?* Indecision was deadly, but I didn't know what was right.

Maybe...I should honor Nina's wishes and let her die on her own terms. I shook my head, trying to push those thoughts away. I shot a glare at Ballrabbit.

*It didn't need to come to this!* Ballrabbit had been doing what Nina wanted, but I couldn't shake that feeling. Noticing my gaze, it slowly raised its head.

"Pfeff..." It let out a sad noise but didn't send me any messages.

I was sure that Nina had told Ballrabbit her whole story. It was a monster, but it was smart. It wouldn't let her die for no reason. Her past must be so exquisitely painful that the rabbit understood that we couldn't trust humans.

Nina's eyelids trembled weakly. Lifting her neck, she looked around until her gaze stopped on me. She smiled faintly.

"I'm...sorry, Mr. Dragon." Her voice was very quiet. "No one has ever been this kind to me before. Even if I knew I couldn't stay with you forever, I wanted to stay as long as I could. I was selfish. I told Bally not to tell you... Please don't blame him."

Nina covered her mouth and coughed again. When it passed, she continued. "I'm sorry, nyaah...for betraying your trust. But please don't feel like what you did was for nothing, nyaah."

Hearing this made me realize that Ballrabbit must have known how worried I was, sensing all my fears that helping Nina would come

to nothing and she'd die anyway. Telepathy was a skill that conveyed thoughts and strong emotions. I hadn't *meant* to send those worries, but they slipped through. Ballrabbit must have told Nina what was on my mind. That was why the two of them kept their plan a secret.

"I had so, so much fun traveling with you, Mr. Dragon, and riding on your back and seeing all the sights and learning how to fish. I was afraid of you at first, but you were so kind even though you only just met me. I realized right away that you were a nice dragon. I didn't understand why you did certain things, but once I thought about it, I realized everything you did, you did for my sake. And then I felt very guilty...but most of all, I felt glad."

Tears fell from my eyes. I was crying over the helpless situation but also because it made me so happy to hear these things. Since I had become a dragon, no one had ever cared for me this much.

"I'm so sorry we have to say goodbye like this. I really wish I could thank you with a smile and say, 'until we meet again!' nyaah."

*What should I do?* Her status had changed from Cursed (Slight) to Cursed. If the progression was that fast, it meant her condition was deteriorating rapidly. I'd left her for a little while to search for cactuses, but my distance wasn't enough to slow the disease.

Maybe I should leave altogether? Monsters would attack her, but that might be less painful than dying from a curse.

*Or maybe...I should take care of her myself before she's in too much pain...with my own claws...*

"Raaaar!" I let out a low roar and looked at Ballrabbit. I had to ask Nina what she wanted me to do. When I looked back at her, she seemed to know what I was thinking. We weren't using Telepathy, but she could tell all the same.

"I wish we could have said goodbye while I was still healthy...but now that it's come to this, can you stay until the end?"

I said nothing. I nodded and gently rubbed her back with my tail.

"Thank you, nyaah...Mr. Dragon," Nina said with a weak smile. Nina, Ballrabbit, and I looked at each other. Keeping her eyes open seemed painful for Nina, but she wouldn't close them. *What should I do? What should I say?* I racked my brain, but I had no answers.

At that moment, I sensed something off in the distance, pinging a

strong reaction from my Psychic Sense skill. Soon after, we heard the sound of hoofbeats.

## Part 5

**H**OOFBEATS? *Is someone coming? If they're good people, I can ask them to take care of Nina. It might not be what she wants, but I can't leave her to die.*

I turned toward the direction of the sound and saw a large man riding across the desert. He was probably only in his twenties or thirties, but his thick brown beard made him look older. He didn't have a turban, but he was wearing the same style of breastplate as those soldiers I'd fought. They must have told him about me. He was alone, but I could tell he was in another class entirely.

*"Niiihii!"* The horse neighed as soon as it saw me, speeding up.

**Adoff Ahrens**

**Species:** *Earth-human*

**Status:** *Prisoner's Mark*

**Lv:** 48/85

**HP:** 262/316

**MP:** 72/98

**Attack:** 243 + 32

**Defense:** 262 + 24

**Magic:** 121

**Agility:** 172

**Equipment:**

**Weapon:** *Harunae Soldier Broadsword: C +*

**Armor:** *Harunae Soldier Breastplate: C*

**Special Skills:**

**Grecian Language:** *Lv 6*

**Swordsman:** *Lv 7*

**Resistance Skills:**



***Physical Resistance: Lv 5***

***Magic Resistance: Lv 4***

***Poison Resistance: Lv 1***

***Blade Resistance: Lv 6***

***Falling Resistance: Lv 1***

***Paralysis Resistance: Lv 2***

***Normal Skills:***

***Shockwave: Lv 5***

***Clay: Lv 2***

***Decoy: Lv 5***

***Mega Cleave: Lv 4***

***Concentration: Lv 6***

***Armor Pierce: Lv 2***

***Title Skill:***

***Former Knight Commander: Lv —***

***Master of Swords: Lv 7***

***Dreadnought: Lv 6***

I wasn't expecting such a stark difference from the other soldiers. Was he even human? His base stats were high, then boosted even higher by his equipment. If he landed a decent attack on me, I might be in trouble. I needed to subdue him before he could do any damage and then see if he could take care of Nina.

The large human Adoff headed straight towards us. First step: talk to him via Telepathy. Ideally, we could stop this before it even started.

"Raar." I moved away from Nina and roared towards Ballrabbit.

"Pfeff." ("Stop. We want. Ta—")

Before Ballrabbit could get a word in, the horse sped up. Adoff raised a sword that looked nearly as big as he was, slashing twice in the air with a furious look on his face. We didn't have time to try Telepathy—I couldn't risk Ballrabbit getting hurt. I had no choice but to subdue Adoff first.

I knocked Ballrabbit towards Nina with my tail, putting them both behind me. *“Pfeff?!” Sorry to be rough.* Waiting too long would put them in the line of fire.

I stepped forward to face Adoff head-on. Raising my wings, I released three Whirlwind Slashes aimed at the horse’s hooves. The first struck from the left, the second a moment behind from the other direction, and the third poised to hit once the horse dodged the first. I had it beat in agility.

“Yaaah!” Adoff bellowed, guiding the horse’s reins, dodging my first and second attacks. That put him exactly where I wanted him, the third Whirlwind Slash heading straight at his steed’s hooves. Adoff tossed his scabbard at the attack, which threw the magical gust of wind off course and easily staved it off. I was prepared for him to fight back, but he did all of this smoothly, entirely unfazed. If he’d been just a fraction of a second slower, I would have taken out his horse and possibly even killed him, and he didn’t even bat an eyelash. Doubtless he’d been in this sort of scenario many times before.

I couldn’t deal with humans the way I dealt with monsters. They were too intelligent, their actions too deliberate. A monster wouldn’t have been able to evade those slashes.

Having survived my opening attack, Adoff came straight for me. I needed to get him off that damn horse. At this speed, countering would be difficult.

I lifted my left arm with an exaggerated flourish. I wanted to grab his attention on the left, then attack from the right and unseat him. When he saw my arm, he readied his sword at his side. Should I take the hit? If I let him hit me on my left, I could wait for the follow-through and then separate him from his horse. I’d incur a fair amount of damage, but it might be worth it. If I had him at my mercy and pulled back, he might realize something was up.

“Arghhh!” He swung his broadsword above his head, and I quickly brought my left arm down to guard myself. At the same time, I reached my right out towards him. His gaze shifted as he realized I was trying to trick him, and he grunted in frustration. Too late. He couldn’t stop the momentum from either his horse or his attack. His sword hit me in the left arm, but it didn’t damage me the way I was expecting. He had hit me with the flat of the blade.

He yanked hard on the reins, using the momentum of his swing to

jump backwards. I clawed the air, grazing the horse's nose. Regaining its balance, the horse immediately lunged in the opposite direction. It retreated, then turned back towards me. Were we going to do this all over again?

Adoff swung his sword in a wide arc, using the upward recoil to dodge my attack. This was the sort of move you could only pull off if you and your horse were perfectly in sync. He was a little unnerved now, wiping sweat from his brow. Still, I hadn't been expecting a human to go this hard.

I was really starting to sound like a monster lately.

Adoff readied another charge, and this time I wouldn't be able to fake him out. He hadn't been expecting a dragon to try a feint—that was the only reason the trick *almost* worked. These strategies needed to be used sparsely; you had to give your opponent time to regain a false sense of security.

The way things stood, subduing him while incurring minimal damage was going to be difficult. Even *without* the handicap of trying to preserve his life, I couldn't let this go on too long. I couldn't risk him hitting me with a direct attack.

Not only did this dude Adoff have high stats, but he had a lot of mental fortitude to go with them. My best bet might be to go after the steed instead of the rider. I needed to throw the horse off balance. I sucked in a deep breath and raised my head to eye level.

*"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaar!"*

The ground rumbled, kicking up a small sandstorm. Adoff's horse seemed spooked by Bellow, judging from the way its body trembled. It slowed down for the briefest of moments, but that was all I needed. I couldn't take any risks with something this tough.

*This is gonna hurt. Forgive me. "Graaar!"* I lashed out as Adoff yanked the reins to the side. With his other hand, he pointed his sword at me. From his face, he clearly knew he'd made a mistake. I punched the horse in the head as hard as I could. The second I made contact, Adoff dropped the reins and stood up in the saddle.

*"Nihiii!"* The horse collapsed on the spot, letting out a choked whinny as it rolled away. Adoff kicked off his stirrups just as the horse began to fall and managed to jump and land on my right shoulder. *Crap, he's going for my head!*

I tucked my shoulder close to my body, bracing for an attack. I opened my mouth, and when I felt something hit my teeth, I bit down. There, I grabbed his sword! I yanked his weapon out of his hand with a mighty swing of my head. Then I spat it out, letting it fly. I smacked at the ground, sending up a cloud of sand. Adoff lost his balance and fell from my shoulder towards my face.

He was stronger than I thought. Taking him alive wasn't going to be easy. I had no choice but to injure him badly in one hit. Afterward, I could use Rest on him and we could negotiate. *Makes for an awkward first meeting, but them's the breaks.* The best-case scenario was obviously both of us making it through without taking damage, but if I kept going easy on him, he'd end up with my head.

As Adoff fell, I batted at him with the palm of my hand, careful to avoid slicing him with my claws. This wouldn't kill him.

Unexpectedly, he curled up in a ball in midair, kicking off my hand. He landed and immediately dropped into a defensive crouch. My hand hit the ground right behind him. He was going to be stubborn about it, apparently.

Regardless, I'd robbed him of both his horse and his weapon. He didn't have the mobility, attack power, or reach he started with.

Adoff stood up, and we stared each other down. I could use this pause in the battle to my advantage. As soon as I moved, Adoff's knees bent in expectation of an attack.

"P-please stop, nyaah! Mr. Dragon! Mr. Dragon!" Nina's voice came from behind me. Hearing it too, Adoff shifted his gaze from me to Nina. She'd been lying hidden in the shallows; he hadn't noticed her.

"A human? Why...?"

I could use this opportunity to negotiate. I took a few steps backwards, trying to move into a defensible position. Adoff saw I hadn't attacked when I had the chance and relaxed just the slightest bit. Briefly, he glanced around to check the position of his sword and then turned back to Nina. "Hey, over there! Are you all right?"

"M-Mr. Dragon was just protecting me, nyaah!" she yelled in her hoarse voice. His eyes widened, and he stared at me. Ballrabbit took this chance to quickly drag itself over to me by its ears.

"P-pfeff!" (*"He says. Wants talk to. You."*)

Adoff looked surprised to see Ballrabbit. Or rather, he looked surprised to see it next to a dragon. He looked back and forth between me, Ballrabbit, and Nina.

He put up both of his hands. “A-all right. I surrender. I want to hear what you have to say. Also...I have someone with me.”

*Well, that went smoothly.* He was far more receptive to negotiation than those other soldiers. Maybe he *would* take Nina for me.

Adoff shouted, “Illusia, please put down your sword and come out. I want to talk to the dragon for a bit.”

*Hm? What? Illusia? How does this guy know my name?*

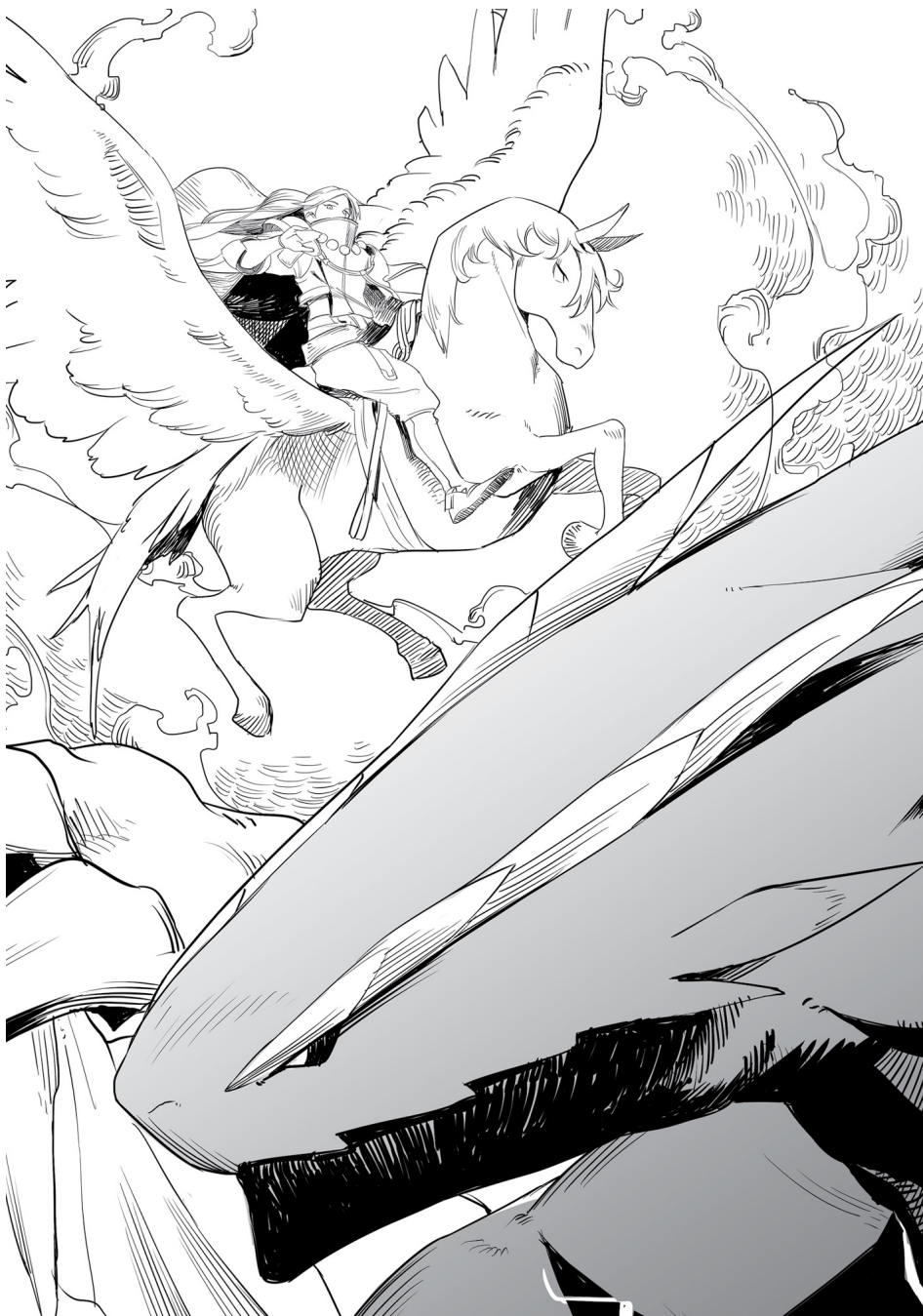
## Part 6

**I**'M PRETTY SURE Adoff just said Illusia, didn't he? What's going on? Why would he say my name? I thought he was calling out to his friend who was hiding.

Turning, I followed his gaze. No one was there in the shallow water but Nina. The curse made standing impossible, so she crouched, her breathing ragged. She looked worried.

I used Psychic Sense and felt a very faint reaction—something magical lurked above me. I squinted into the sky.

“Didn’t you hear me? I’m calling a truce for now.” As Adoff spoke, a patch of sky wavered slightly, and a man appeared. He rode a winged horse of pure white and held a sword.



“That won’t do, Adoff. Why would you give me up like that, when we’re so close to victory? I held back specifically to let you have all the

glory.”

The original plan seemed to be for Adoff to attack me head-on, drawing my attention so that the man on the flying horse could wait for the right moment. But hiding was an understatement—he’d used magic to conceal his presence completely. Was that a skill?

The man’s ponytail fluttered in the wind, hair so blond it was almost white. His eyelashes were long, his features delicate. He wasn’t large and muscular like Adoff. He had an average build, average height, and didn’t appear that strong. He certainly didn’t have a presence like Adoff’s. But something about him felt very...off.

“Hmm, I was sure you’d be fine without a contingency plan against a dragon of this level. Though it *is* a strange creature. This is the best a Plague Dragon’s got?” He narrowed his eyes and grinned, his smile cold with malice. His hand clenched the hilt of his sword.

This guy was no good. He was absolutely spoiling for a fight. I knew instantly there would be no getting through to him. Talking to someone like this would be a waste of time. He saw me as a conquest and nothing else. If he was the same class as Adoff, getting him off my back would be difficult. And he was riding on a *flying* horse...definitely bad news.

“H-hey, Illusia! Put down your sword! If you can’t trust me, at least back up and let me handle this.”

The man ignored Adoff and brandished his weapon. I raised my arms, bracing for an airborne attack. Instead, we made eye contact.

“Why does a monster have the same name as me? Frankly, that makes me sick.” The man brought his sword down. I didn’t have time to wonder what he meant.

A simple attack, but fast. The sword glimmered slightly; it might be enchanted. My plan was to take the attack with my right arm to knock him off balance and then counter with my left. I had to knock him off that horse. Who knows, maybe he’d give up without his ride, just like Adoff had. I got my arm into position, and a searing heat raced across my skin before the sword even hit me. This guy was stronger than I thought. Blocking him with my bare hands might have taken my arm off.

Change of plans. I took flight, attempting to regain some ground.



“Celestial Fall!” The man swung his sword. The ambient glow around the blade bloomed out towards my left shoulder.

It was fast. I couldn’t dodge it. Unfurling my wings, I wrapped them around myself defensively.

“*Graaaaar!*” The light hit my wings, and an intense wave of heat shot through my whole body. The impact spun me, my world flipping upside down as I hit the ground shoulder-first. A cloud of dust kicked up around me as I Rolled. The attack knocked me back twenty yards and left a trail in the sand.

My shoulder ached, and my vicious slide over the ground had scraped off scales so that I was now bleeding. The worst of the pain was localized to where the light had hit me. I opened my mouth to cry out—when I heard a piercing noise so loud that it made me want to cover my ears. My consciousness was going hazy, but the noise jolted me back to reality. *Damn it, I almost passed out. What the heck did he just do to me?* I crawled across the sand, trying to find the source of the explosion.

A rift split the surface of the desert. *Was that where I hit the ground? Good thing I skidded away.* Getting caught in that blast would have damaged me far worse.

“M-Mr. Dragon!” Nina stood up. She was trying to come to me, but she could barely keep on her feet. Her knees buckled and she collapsed, falling forward into the shallow water with a splash. She moaned and tried, once again, to stand.

I wanted to tell her to take it easy, but I couldn’t speak. I could barely move. That attack took a lot of my HP.

“Hey! I told you to stop, Illusia!”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Adoff. I just saved your hide.”

My body felt heavy, and my brain wasn’t working right. I cast Rest, but it wasn’t nearly enough. I had very high Magic, but my species just wasn’t cut out for healing. Without constant practice, my grip on the skill might even start to gradually erode into nothing.

Somehow, I managed to lift my head and locate the man trying to kill me. He was staring Adoff down with a nasty smirk, ignoring me completely.

“*Graah...*” I groaned and heaved myself up. My muscles felt tight, and moving was painful. Damn it—he used Paralysis on me! Blondie

was way stronger than he looked—as strong as a monster. Besides, he was Adoff’s partner, meaning I couldn’t just kill him without ruining my negotiations. But I wouldn’t be able to fight him if I held back. Hell, I didn’t even know if I could beat him at full power.

It would be one thing if he’d snuck up on me to attack, but here he was, facing me down without a hint of fear. That was weird. I couldn’t run away—Ballrabbit and Nina weren’t close enough. And if I *did* manage to collect them and flee, that would obliterate my opportunity to ask Adoff to save Nina, and then we’d be back to square one.

In the meantime, I needed to check the guy’s stats. As he got off his horse and shook his head in exasperation, I stared at his profile and used View Status.

**Normal Skill “View Status” Lv 6 is unable to provide complete information.**

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*Ah, it’s been a while since I got that message.* The guy’s status was filled with a bunch of weird characters and symbols, and I couldn’t read all of it. He must be the same as the slime. Having his skills blocked out was fishy enough, but the stats that I *could* see were strange too. Judging from the usual layout, he was level 78, and his max HP was 602. Almost all his stats were higher than mine; high enough that he could have taken out my nemesis the giant centipede in the blink of an eye.

“Guess I didn’t even have to use the sword.” The man sheathed his weapon. He wore three swords. One was like those of the soldiers I’d fought before—they must be standard issue in the walled city. “C’mon, Adoff. Hurry up and kill it. How will you show your face in the city if

you don't do your part?"

"But this dragon doesn't seem violent. It could have killed me, but it didn't. And there's a demi-human with it..."

"So? I could have killed the dragon, and I haven't yet. What does that prove?"

"But..."

"I know what it's doing, Adoff. It's underestimating you. It thinks it can kill you any time it wants. Doesn't that make sense, *former* Knight Commander?"

Adoff's expression tightened at "former." Seeing his reaction, the man hid his mouth with one hand. His shoulders were shaking slightly. Wait, was he laughing?

I didn't know what kind of relationship these two had, but Adoff kept glancing at me from the corner of his eye, while Blondie didn't seem concerned at all. What was this guy's deal? His stats were out-of-this-world high. He must be cocky as all hell, guard totally down after he'd pulled off that surprise attack.

If I didn't move, I could buy some time before he bothered to finish me off. I had to avoid provoking him for as long as I could and wait for the paralysis to go away, and for Automatic HP Recovery to replenish my stamina. This was a bad situation, but I needed to stay calm.

If I went line by line, maybe I could figure out what his status said despite the weird distortion effects. When I first saw the slime, View Status was at level 3. I was at level 6 now. Surely that would be enough to read *something*.

I checked again.

**Normal Skill "View Status" Lv 6 is unable to provide complete information.**

I struggled to decipher as much as I could from the display, piecing together the letters one by one as I went.

***Illusia***

***Species: Earth-human***

***Status: Normal***

***Lv: 78/100***

***HP: 602/602***

***MP: 552/552***

***Attack: 354***

***Defense: 264 + 76***

***Magic: 347***

***Agility: 325***

***Equipment:***

***Armor: Water Dragon Robe: B +***

***\*\*\*\*\*:***

***\*\*\*: Lv —***

***Special Skills:***

***Divine Voice: Lv 7***

***Spirit's Protection: Lv —***

***Fairy King's Blessing: Lv —***

***Light Type: Lv —***

***Grecian Language: Lv 6***

***Swordsman: Lv 9***

***Psychic Sense: Lv 6***

***Stealth: Lv 7***

***Resistance Skills:***

***Physical Resistance: Lv 6***

***Magic Resistance: Lv 6***

***Dark Resistance: Lv 7***

***Illusion Resistance: Lv 5***

***Poison Resistance: Lv 5***

***Curse Resistance: Lv 3***

***Petrify Resistance: Lv 5***

***Instant Death Resistance: Lv 4***

***Paralysis Resistance: Lv 3***

***Normal Skills:***

***View Status: Lv MAX***

***Shockwave: Lv 6***

***Deca-Renzuki: Lv 5***

***Celestial Fall: Lv 6***

***Earth Fall: Lv 5***

***Lucent Luna: Lv 7***

***Summon: Lv 7***

***Slash: Lv 6***

***Illusion: Lv 3***

***Holy: Lv 5***

***Hi-Rest: Lv 5***

***Quick: Lv 4***

***Power: Lv 5***

***Mana Barrier: Lv 2***

***Physical Barrier: Lv 4***

***Title Skills:***

***Chosen One: Lv —***

***Hero: Lv 5***

***Valiant: Lv 7***

***Cunning: Lv 9***

***Wrongdoer: Lv MAX***

***Liar: Lv 8***

***Dastardly King: Lv 9***

***Calamity: Lv 3***

***Laplace Interference Authority: Lv 3***

***Bug King's Contractor: Lv —***

*It worked! This guy has one too many skills when you compare him to everyone else. That must be why he feels so weird. The slime must have had*

*a ton of 'em too, even if I can't remember what they all were right now.* Not that it helped me in this situation, because now that I had the whole picture, it was clear I couldn't beat him. I'd rather fight the giant centipede any day of the week.

*Why do we have the same name? It isn't a family name, it's his actual given name!* Illusia was a flower, so maybe it was common to name your children after it, but I'd never met anyone else with it. Adding that to everything else—his Divine Voice skill, and the other title skills we shared—this began to look suspicious. *Seriously, what is going on?*

The man turned my way, narrowed his eyes, and clicked his tongue. “Stop staring at me like that, it's annoying. I've had enough. If the former Knight Commander isn't going to finish it, I will.”

*Uh-oh, he's coming this way. I'm still paralyzed—what can I do?* Both fighting and fleeing had their risks. I was frozen in indecision.

*(“Where you. Looking? Up.”)*

Suddenly I received a message via Telepathy. *Huh? Up? What are you talking about?*

“Huh?” The man paused and looked up at the sky. Sand scattered at his feet, and Ballrabbit popped out of the ground.

*“Pfeff!”*

Five flaming spheres appeared, all zooming for the man at once. Ballrabbit's Illuminate skill. The man jumped back, then batted them away with his bare hands.

*“R-raaaaaar!” H-hey! What do you think you're doing, Ballrabbit?! There's no way you can beat him! Not even with a sneak attack!*

## Part 7

**P**LAGUE DRAGONS weren't a big deal.

Truth be told, I'd never seen one in person. I was expecting a rank A monster, but this was just a regular old rank B-. The giant centipede was more dangerous than this thing. Whatever. Not everything could live up to the hype, I supposed.

I'd heard that a monster's rank was simply decided based on notes made by previous heroes, and the last hero lived a long time ago—five hundred years ago, to be exact. No wonder the information wasn't up to date. Even a hero couldn't fight every monster in existence. The ranks might just be arbitrary.

I'd used Adoff as bait out of an abundance of caution, but I didn't expect the Plague Dragon to be a weakling that he could toss around like a punching bag. And I *definitely* didn't expect it to have Divine Voice. Not that it mattered. It wasn't a Demon King, so this was just a coincidence. Sometimes these things did happen.

But a little wimpy dragon with *my* name? That pissed me off.

"Guess I didn't even have to use the sword," I mumbled, sheathing the holy blade. We'd come far enough that I may as well let Adoff have the glory. The dragon's HP was low, and it was paralyzed. I'd let Adoff ride around on a little monster-killing high and then send him straight to hell.

I still couldn't believe this beefcake bought my story so easily. He honestly believed that I'd gone out of my way to save him. And he'd been so embarrassing in public. To think at his age he'd give me an "I'm soooo grateful to you!" What a hopeless fool. If you were too stupid to notice the consequences of your own actions, you deserved to die.

"C'mon, Adoff. Hurry up and kill it. How will you show your face in the city if you don't do your part?"

Adoff glanced to where the dragon was crawling along in the sand. "But this dragon doesn't seem violent. It could have killed me, but it didn't. And there's a demi-human with it..."

*Ugh, he's so annoying!* What the hell is this idiot even talking about? I should kill him now; I couldn't stand the thought of being

polite for one more second. At this point I didn't even care if people suspected me.

"So? I could have killed the dragon, and I haven't yet. What does that prove?" I snapped, distracted. I didn't care about any of this.

"But..."

"I know what it's doing, Adoff. It's underestimating you. It thinks it can kill you any time it wants. Doesn't that make sense, *former* Knight Commander?"

His expression went ugly. *Whoops, he asked me to stop calling him that, didn't he? Well, that's the end of that. And after I'd been so careful to play nice!* Maybe he'd been suspicious of my motives this whole time. I hid my mouth, somehow managing to keep my laughter in.

I sensed someone looking at me. The dragon was just lying there quietly, staring. What was it doing, checking my status? That's right—it had the View Status skill. Even with a perfectly reasonable explanation, it made me uncomfortable. I didn't want to give it the chance to figure out a strategy, but what I really hated was the thought of someone rifling through my title skills.

"Stop staring at me like that, it's annoying. I've had enough. If the former Knight Commander isn't going to finish it, I will." I stared it down, and the dragon trembled. It was terrified of me. Well, now. I certainly never expected a dragon to treat *me* like a monster.

*("Where you. Looking? Up.")*

Just as I began to move, a sentence appeared in my head. It was Telepathy. Did the dragon even have that skill? I must have missed it. Annoying, but whatever. If it wanted to fight this way, so be it.

"Huh?" I looked up at the sky. The sand at my feet exploded and some kind of tiny pink monster flew out.

*"Pfeff!"*

A peach ballrabbit. Why the hell did it send me a Telepathy message? Ballrabbits were usually just kept as pets, and they had a very keen sense of danger. Why would it reveal its hiding place like that? Wait, I'd seen it next to the dragon earlier. Were they partners?

The peach ballrabbit surrounded itself with balls of light and threw them my way.



It was only a D-rank monster. I took a half step backwards and batted the balls of light away with my bare hand, extinguishing them.

“R-raaaaaar!”

As I reached for my sword, the Plague Dragon let out a roar. Huh, so they really *were* partners. Plague Dragons were said to be ruthless, dangerous monsters. This one was a weirdo—acting all friendly and picking up slave girls, gaining title skills like Itty-Bitty Hero and Protective Spirit. And he just happened to share the name of generations of heroes.

Hmm, maybe I should reevaluate. This Plague Dragon could prove interesting. *Let me just kill the peach ballrabbit and see how it reacts.*

I smirked and reached for my sword, but then thought better of it. I’d beat the thing to death instead. No reason to dirty my blade for a lowly rank D monster.

I raised my bare fists and advanced. The ballrabbit’s cheeks puffed out.

“Pfeff!”

I paused, confused, when a hail of needles shot from its mouth. *What the heck...? Oh, they’re cactus spines. It must’ve stored them in its body to use as a weapon. What an annoying, cheap trick.*

I knocked the needles aside with my scabbard.

“P-pfeff!”

The ballrabbit freaked out. I grabbed it by the ears and smiled. Its little body shook.

“Graaaaaar!” The Plague Dragon pitched forward and let out a scream, trying to move even with its muscles rigid from paralysis.

Good. Very good. Anything else would be boring. I let go of the ballrabbit’s ears and kicked it. Or I tried to. Someone grabbed me from behind before I could put any real heft into it.

“Pfeff!” The ballrabbit smacked its ears on the ground to absorb the force of the kick and immediately leapt up. I clicked my tongue and turned around.

“Listen. Could you give me a second, former Knight Commander?”

Adoff stood behind me with a conflicted expression. This guy was really getting on my nerves. He’d done his job as bait; he was useless to

me now. I'd planned to torture him slowly after I took care of the dragon, but maybe I could reorder my schedule. I could deal with Adoff now, then take my time with the Plague Dragon.

"Illusia...you've been acting strangely ever since we left the city. What's wrong?" Adoff seemed to be choosing his words carefully, so as not to upset me. Wow, I guess he *did* catch on. Back in the city everything went according to plan, but maybe I wasn't quite as slick as I thought.

So, what now? I could take care of Adoff, but the Plague Dragon's paralysis could wear off at any time. Besides, I'd gone to so much trouble devising the perfect punishment for Adoff. It would be a waste not to see it through. But I also wanted to take my time with the Plague Dragon...

And the dragon had Divine Voice. I might be able to pump it for information about the skill, since the bishop was so adamant to keep it from me. There was no limit to what I could discover while I played around.

"H-hey. Hey! What's going on? Don't just stand there, say something!"

*Cool it, man. I'm thinking.* Did this idiot think I couldn't hear with him yelling in my face? I knew Adoff. I had to eliminate his doubts or he wouldn't shut up about the Plague Dragon and the slave girl.

"Ugh, are you serious? This is so annoying."

"Illusia?" He repeated my name. I ignored him and drew my sword, pointing it straight at him.

"Wanna train me for old time's sake, former Knight Commander? You can even use your broadsword." I tipped my head in challenge.

"What are you talking about?" He took a bewildered step backwards. He was so stupid. Did I really have to spell this out for him?

"Oh, it's just...I wanted you to see how much I've grown. I wanted to humiliate you, like you did to me in front of all those people four years ago. Alas, the bishop wouldn't go for it, and I couldn't do it all on my own the way I'd envisioned. So, I decided that if I had to play it this way, I'd paint myself the hero and the former Knight Commander the villain. But really...it's quite a risky plan. Especially if something goes wrong."

Adoff's eyes went wide, his jaw tightening. Even this chump couldn't mistake this.

"Long story short, I killed your fiancée and your little brother, and I blamed it on you. I knew once you were in jail I'd have plenty of opportunities to leverage my position as a hero. Fooling people is easy, especially with my magic. Not that there's anyone in this country who would dare doubt me. The idiots from the church already hate you. They bought it quick. No investigation necessary."

Adoff's stare grew murderous. Good. I liked that. That was what I wanted to see. No doubt he was wrestling with how much he wanted to kill me.

But he wouldn't. His sword couldn't touch me, and even if it did, I wouldn't die. He couldn't beat me. The desire might be there, but I'd trample him to death. I'd deal back the humiliation he gave me four years ago a hundred times over. Then this blight would finally be gone from my life.

The look on Adoff's face made happiness bloom in my chest. How I'd longed for this day to come. *Thank you, Adoff. If you hadn't betrayed me like that, I never would have sought revenge, and I wouldn't have gone on the journey that made me so powerful. And I wouldn't have gotten to feel this incredible sense of satisfaction. I'm grateful to you for that. I hope you writhe in pain, choking on the sand as you die. If you hate anyone, hate yourself for what you did to me that day.*

Adoff retrieved his broadsword from where it was stuck in the sand. Brandishing it high over his head, he leveled it at me.

"Answer me one question."

"What?"

"You killed my little brother and Sylphie because I made you lay down your sword?"

"Sylphie?" Adoff's eyes burned. Oh, right. That must be his fiancée. As if I bothered to learn the names of the people I disposed of. Who cares? What the hell did that lady find attractive about this oaf? "Come on. That wasn't the only reason. Do I look that stupid?" Maybe just a little more playing. "In Harunae, if someone flees while on trial for a grave crime, their relatives are punished in their place. Mostly it's meant as a deterrent, but it *has* been carried out before."

All the color drained from Adoff's face.

"When I get back to Harunae, what do you think I'll say about you? Do you think I'll say that the Plague Dragon killed you?"

Yes, yes. This was perfect. I felt amazing. Under normal circumstances, the church holding his family to account was unlikely. But I had it all set up. I'd cashed in a favor to spread rumors that Adoff's family was engaged in suspicious activity.

Knowing the bishop, given a single excuse, he'd gladly put Adoff's relatives to death in his stead. I'd thought of everything. As long as I beat Adoff, not only would he never avenge the deaths of his fiancée and his brother, but the rest of his family would die as well. Even his elderly relatives.

Adolf couldn't afford to lose this battle under *any* circumstances. But of course, it was completely impossible for him to win against me. Our stats made it a done deal. He was going to die screaming, drained of all hope.

"Bring it on, Adoff! I'll fight you without magic, with just this crappy Harunae gear!" I brandished the standard-issue military sword. I wouldn't use my holy or cursed blades. At least not until I made him realize how badly he was outclassed. I could use those at the end. For overkill.

"Illusia!" Adoff raised his broadsword and lunged. I thought about just severing his wrists and head and getting it over with, but that would be letting him off too easy.

Fortunately, the Plague Dragon didn't seem keen on moving any time soon. I could take my time.

I watched Adoff's eyes, reading his movements. I dodged easily, purposely evading four continuous strikes by a hair. Frustrated, Adoff lunged on a diagonal, and I spun behind him easily. None of his hits even came close. How pathetic that this was Harunae's strongest knight.

"Were you always this slow? I guess you've been slacking off in that jail cell." He didn't react to my taunts. Made sense. I'd already said so much worse.

What a waste of carefully crafted threats. I wanted to make this last, but I still had the Plague Dragon to think about. I shouldn't waste my energy.

Time for a more direct approach, then.

“How does it feel, knowing your vanity cost you the lives of your brother and fiancée? And those of your parents, once they die in your place? Better take me out while you still have the chance!”

“You bastard!”

Perfect, now he was angry. He had no concept of how much I’d been anticipating this. It wouldn’t be any fun if he just lay down and died.

Adoff gave into his emotions and swung his sword high. Come on. *You can’t beat me on a normal day, let alone if you’re telegraphing your attacks!* I knew his strategy; he wanted to get one hard hit on me while I was trying to evade. If Adoff could have seen our respective statuses, he would know that was futile. He’d give up and hand me his head. Pitiful.

I ran past him. His strike missed, hitting the ground and kicking up a cloud of sand.

“Argh...” He grimaced and grabbed at his ear with his right hand.

“If I remember correctly...when you got on your high horse to lecture me, you said ‘you won’t land a hit if you put too much force behind it. You’ll just lose your balance and get countered.’ Does that ring a bell?” I sneered at him. “I don’t need this. I’ll give it back to you.”

I brandished his severed ear on the tip of my sword. I flicked it into the air, then swung my sword back and hit it with the flat of the blade. I meant to let him catch it, but it exploded with a splatter of blood. “Whoops. Sorry about that.”

Adoff put pressure on the wound to slow the bleeding, immediately taking up his sword again. A Knight Commander until the end.

“I’ll come at you from here this time,” I said and dashed towards him. He wasn’t expecting me to move so quickly. I saw the shock in his eyes.

“I’m over here! No, here! Here!” I struck from the right and then the left, swiftly swinging my sword. “You guard so slow! You’re terrible at this. You should really put your back into it!” I dropped my speed to where he’d just barely be able to keep up and attacked again. He was in no position to fight back and had no choice but to block with everything he had. I didn’t give him the chance to fix his stance, and he

staggered beneath every one of my blows. I put down my sword and kicked him square in the stomach.

“Nnghff!” His bulk fell backward, hitting the ground with an incredible impact. He *still* didn’t put down his sword, the sloppy idiot—instead, he immediately scrambled back up and to attention. Oh, this was getting *sad*. Maybe I should fight him with my bare hands. Or would that make this even more wretched?

“I’ll kill you!” Adoff screamed as he charged me.

I spread my arms. “The fifth strike. I’ll cut off your hand on the fifth strike.” Slowly, I adjusted my grip, lining up my hit. “Here we go. One, two, three...” Smoothly, I moved into the attack. If he managed to block a single one, I’d lose my leverage. I couldn’t allow that.

“Four.” I moved faster. Adoff guarded too late and lost his balance. He stumbled forward, left hand in front of him, swinging out, suddenly vulnerable. I laughed. “And now, five!” I swung my sword in a small arc. I couldn’t have asked for a better opportunity, and I literally could not stop laughing. I lifted my gaze, needing to see his face as I severed his hand. “Hm?”

Adoff swung his sword toward me in a single-armed strike. He had predicted my movements and purposefully flaunted his left hand to draw me in, but I was still much faster than him. It was easy to dodge. It sucked to have to abandon my plan, but I could go back to torturing him slowly. I retreated, giving up on cutting off his hand for now.

“Shockwave!” The slashes of Adoff’s broadsword took form and swept towards me. Clever. That helped him gain back ground. It forced me to engage even when I didn’t want to. And it wasted my time, which I hated.

After I dealt with this counterattack, I was going to kill him. I’d meant to get through this without taking a single hit, but he went and spoiled the whole thing. Read the room, buddy.

I crossed my arms, blocking the Shockwave attack. Adoff followed up by throwing his sword at me.

What in the world was he doing? He had to know how easily I could dodge that. Was he bowing to my superior firepower and giving it up, or was this a last-ditch attempt at a counterattack before he lost his nerve? Maybe I’d broken his spirit with all the teasing.

I dodged his tossed sword, right as he reached out a hand toward me.

“Clay!” Adoff screamed. I dropped into a guard against earth magic, focusing my attention on the ground. A strange metallic clang rang out behind me, and I realized he’d used Clay to pick up his fallen sword. It wasn’t close enough to hit me, though. Unsurprising—this was truly an act of desperation.

I glanced over my shoulder in time to see Adoff’s sword flying in a diagonal above me. “Yeah, yeah. Good for you. You got a hit in. Kind of pathetic if you really think about it, but—hm?” I turned back around to find Adoff charging at me. He clumsily grabbed his sword from midair, aiming straight for my face. It wasn’t a skilled or calculated move as much as a haphazard gambit, but dodging it from my crouch would be difficult. I could counter it, of course, but even if I dealt a fatal blow, his attack would still connect. I couldn’t block with magic, either.

Now I finally understood. Adoff heard my declaration to cut his hand off in five hits. And therefore purposefully drew my focus to his arm to catch me off guard and use the earth magic. Rage boiled inside of me. I’d fallen into a trap.

This was so ridiculous. Utterly foolish. Even with my guard down, this shouldn’t have happened. I clicked my tongue, reaching out as Adoff charged me.

“Kneel.” I pointed a finger to the ground. Instantly, Adoff dropped his sword and pitched forward. He couldn’t manage to catch himself and hit the ground hard.

“Arrghh?!”

I sheathed my sword, dusting myself off and standing up. “This is really tedious.”

The Prisoner’s Mark. A command spoken aloud with accompanying magic, and Adoff was mine to control. A condition of his temporary release, an extra precaution if he attempted an escape. The degree of efficacy varied between people, but it could restrict his movement for at least a couple of seconds.

But that wasn’t the point. I was supposed to kill him after I proved my superiority. I was never going to actually *use* the Prisoner’s Mark. This was just absolutely cratering my mood.

“Y-you’re a coward...” Adoff spat at me. How stupid was he? He had no idea.

“Your attacks wouldn’t have damaged me even if you *had* managed to connect. You’re resorting to cheap tricks. I’m bored, you idiot. You’re a disgrace to knights everywhere!”

I wasn’t lying—his attack wouldn’t kill me, and I could heal immediately with Hi-Rest anyway. Still, a deep enough wound could leave behind a scar, even with healing magic. I wouldn’t risk Adoff marring my pretty face. Absolutely unacceptable.

He was a fool, unable to fight me without resorting to tricks. I was going easy on him, and he did this, then had the nerve to call *me* a coward.

“Anyway. That’s enough of that. See ya.” I kicked him in the shoulder and drew my cursed sword. I drove the sinister, dark crimson blade right through his back.

“Aaarrghhhh!”

It wasn’t a fatal blow, but I’m sure it hurt. This was the cursed sword Vampire Princess—legends alleged that it was created by one of the Demon King’s torturers. A single blow siphoned the target’s life force to the sword’s owner, imparting both poison *and* curse. I could leave Adoff to die in agony.

“So long, escaped prisoner Adoff.” I tapped him with my foot. He groaned, eyes murderous. I spat in his face.

Man, this sucked. I was expecting to be in high spirits after getting rid of Adoff, but it wasn’t at all satisfying. My guts were unsettled, like I’d eaten something that disagreed with me...eh, whatever.

At least I had this little fledgling Plague Dragon to cheer me up. Its paralysis seemed to be improving, though it wasn’t yet in complete control of its movements. It couldn’t do much with that enormous body right now.

The peach ballrabbit had run away. I could find it with Psychic Sense, but if it was underground I wouldn’t be able to distinguish it from other monsters. It was too weak to ambush me. Going after it would be a waste of time.

That left the slave girl. She’d yelled something at Adoff—was she friends with the Plague Dragon? If so, she was invaluable. I glanced



meaningfully at the dragon and then made my way over to her.

“Eek, noo!” She screamed as I approached, voice trembling. The dragon roared at her distress, voice filled with malice. I was right—they *were* friends. What the hell was the stupid thing trying to do, provoke me when it couldn’t even move? It could see my status, so it had to know how outmatched it was. It wasn’t that sharp, apparently.

The slave girl had cat ears. A Felis-human, then. According to her status, her name was Nina Nefah. Her fighting abilities were basically zero; she was most likely only capable of hunting E-rank monsters. She must have been the sole survivor from the incident where the merchant fed a bunch of slaves to a giant sand centipede. I remembered the man mentioning a dragon, but why would it bother to save a slave girl?

I could *really* play with this dragon. I licked my lips without realizing. Whoops, that was no good. I thought I’d gotten rid of that habit. It tended to put people off.

Seeing the slave girl up close...she was beautiful. The dragon must have kept her close for quite a while, because her status said “Cursed.” That explained why she looked so pale, but she was pretty enough for it not to matter. She had the big cat eyes characteristic of Felis-humans, a sweet little mouth that made you want to protect her, and a well-shaped nose. Incredible for someone who ended up stuffed in a cramped slave trader’s carriage. Couldn’t he have found a better way to sell her off than carting her across a desert?

I’d found a rare treasure. Killing her would be a waste. I could come up with another way to torture the dragon. For now, I’d take her home with me and sell her. She’d fetch a hefty price. Although, given my position, it might be difficult to facilitate a sale, even through a proxy.

I really didn’t want to kill her. What if I slew the dragon and told everyone I rescued this damsel? That would be quite the reputation boost. If I publicized my heroic actions, I’d win back the favor of that irritating bishop.

He’d be annoyed with the Adoff situation; the least I could do was bring him back a souvenir. I was planning to leave Harunae very soon anyway. No reason I couldn’t add a plus-one. She made for a great conversation piece, and if our personalities clashed and she annoyed me, I could always kill her. No one would look for her.

“Now, now. Just calm down. I bet you were scared, hm? I’m here to save you. What’s your name?” I spoke as brightly as I could, pasting on a gentle smile and reaching out my hand. I already knew her name, of course, but answering simple questions would help her relax and let me gauge where her mind was.

She’d just watched me slash a man down in cold blood, but I wasn’t worried. I mean, this girl had shacked up with a *Plague Dragon*. Even in a life-or-death scenario, a normal girl wouldn’t be able to handle that. Clearly, she was the sort who would do anything to preserve her own life. She was the sole survivor of a catastrophe, and I was sure it was no coincidence.

If she believed me to be her only salvation, she’d run happily into my arms. A woman in this situation would know to curry favor with me, despite her discomfort.

“Ni...” Her voice trembled. She swallowed, gathering herself, digging her fingernails into her thighs to stop her body from shaking.

“Ni? Does your name start with Ni?” I asked gently. Her eyes widened.

“Nyaah!” Despite her pain-racked huddle, she leapt up and scrambled away from me. It took me a moment to react; only when I felt the pain in my face did I realize that she had clawed me.

*I go out of my way to be nice to her, and she does this!* I reached up and traced the wounds with my fingers. “How dare you put your filthy claws on me, beast? You’ve got some guts. Truly.”

*Change of plans. I’ll kill her after all—simplify the plan and save myself any trouble. And it’ll feel really good.*

“Nya—ahh!”

I smacked her with my palm to frighten her and then grabbed her slender neck to yank her up.

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaar!” The dragon roared, bellowing up towards the sky. Its paralysis had almost entirely receded, and it would soon be free to move.

I released the girl, and she dropped to her knees, exhausted. The curse left her incredibly weak. Without my intervention, she’d die.

Hey, if the Plague Dragon’s paralysis was gone, shouldn’t it try catching me off guard with Whirlwind Slash or something? Instead, it

kicked up a bunch of fuss, tipping me off that it could move again. Moron. Or maybe it assumed I'd lose interest in the girl if it was ready to fight.

"Heh heh..." I couldn't suppress my laughter. I had hope for this Plague Dragon. I liked it. It amused me, so much so that killing it right here would be a waste.

No, it needed the perfect death. *This Plague Dragon loves humans so much. I think I know a way to take it down and stick it to the church in the process.*

## Part 8

**L**ABORIOUSLY, I put weight on my limbs and heaved myself upward. Good, I could move. The paralysis was finally starting to wear off. That blond jerk over there still had his back to me, talking to Nina. I roared a little, but he didn't turn around. Maybe he thought I was still down for the count...or maybe he didn't care. This guy was strong. Ridiculously strong. With our current stats, a head-on attack would mean certain death. I couldn't take him. For some reason he'd decided to go for Adoff instead of me, and even I could tell he hadn't attacked with his full strength.

Still...his overwhelming superiority made him cocky. If I hit him hard and fast right now when his back was turned, I might be able to get through his guard.

Holding my breath, I dug my back legs into the ground in preparation: I would lunge, hook my claws into him, fly up high, and slam him back down.

Right as I was about to make my move, I saw Nina claw at the man's face. His hand was extended towards her as if asking for a handshake, but after her attack, he used that same hand to smack her, knocking her down.

*Hey, Nina! What are you doing? I get you're angry, but don't provoke him! He's dangerous!*

For a split second, the man looked stunned. Then a smile crept over his face. It was startlingly creepy, like a horror movie monster.

The man staggered over to Nina and lifted her up by her neck. He was gonna kill her. Even if I charged him right now, I wouldn't make it in time.

Nina was already marked for death. If Blondie didn't strangle her, the Dragon Scale Powder's curse would finish her off. A quick death might be better. Less painful. I had no idea what it would be like to die of a wicked dragon's curse.

Still, I'd made a promise.

*"Can you stay until the end?"*

I would not allow him to touch her with those filthy hands.

“*Raaaaaaaar!*” I reared up and roared towards the sky. The man immediately dropped Nina and spun toward me. *That sure got his attention. No more chance of a sneak attack, but I don’t regret it.*

I streaked through the air toward him. His stats beat all of mine into the ground, but an ego like that was a handicap. Chances were good he would hold back with me like he did with Adoff, drawing out the battle. He’d let his guard down at some point—it was inevitable. And that’s when I would strike.

“...Heh. Heh heh.”

*What’s so funny, dude?* This guy had problems.

“*Graaaaaar!*” I aimed my claws at the back of his head, slowly and with only a fraction of my full strength. The man easily parried with his sword, and a metallic clang rang out. I’d pulled my punch to make him underestimate me. If I miscalculated, he’d immediately retaliate and strike, but he was so much stronger than me that I couldn’t see another option.

I didn’t expect to land a decisive hit on him from one misstep, and there was always the chance he’d hit me with another paralyzing attack. This was a longshot.

Claws clashed with blade. As we fought, I did my best to lure him into thinking this was my usual style. He was faster than me, but I had a longer reach. That brought us closer to evenly matched, but only in this precise scenario. He was bound to have a ton of magical skills to increase his attack range. Judging by his current expression, he was clearly playing around.

“*Raar!*” I swung my arm, and he leapt to the side, leaving my claws slashing thin air before piercing into the ground. His expression relaxed. *Now, now, now!*

“*Graar!*” With my opposite paw, I punched him as hard as I could.

“Wha—” He must have really thought I was as slow as I was pretending to be. His reaction time was terrible.

*I can do it.* A hard hit would scuff up that pristine confidence. When he fought Adoff, almost taking damage panicked him. I could win.

I smashed him with my claws and felt...nothing. No resistance at

all. It was like hitting a monster's Mirage. And he *did* have a skill called Illusion...

"Keep it together. Don't worry, I won't use my full strength." I heard his voice from above. "Celestial Fall!" An incredible force slammed into my skull, punching me to the ground.

"*Graaar!*" My vision wavered as my head hit the sand. My consciousness faded in and out.

**Resistance Skill "Paralysis Resistance" Lv 2 has become Lv 3.**

The Divine Voice announced a level up, but I couldn't afford to get excited. The man was climbing on top of me and hefting his sword. He was going to kill me.

"*Grrar...*"

"No need to howl. I think you're interesting. You understand me, don't you?" The man smiled and sheathed his sword. Then he started clapping.

*Seriously. What is up with this guy?!*

"I never thought I'd meet a dragon with such emotional depth! I gotta tell you, I'm so moved right now." He wiped away an invisible tear. Why bother messing with me? Why put on a show when he was seconds from killing me?

"Still, though," he went on. "I have a hard time believing it. I know, I know. It's rude to doubt you, but I'm a very cynical person. I just want to test my theory. So...what do you say to another little sacrifice?" I didn't believe a word of any of this. What was he rambling on about? *Get to the point!*

He leaned over to look me right in the eye. "In five days... No, I should do it sooner than that... In four days. Yes, that's better. Four days. Due north from here is the country I was born in. Meet me there in four days, at high noon. The trip is just about forty-eight hours if you hurry." As he spoke, the man pointed back the way we'd come. Toward the walled city.

*He wants me to go there?*

If I went into a human settlement, there'd be panic. This guy's behavior was odd from the beginning, but now he was completely blowing my mind. Hadn't he come to keep me *away* from the walled city? His words and actions were completely contradictory. He made no

sense.

*“Graaaaaar!” There’s no way I’m gonna do that! I’m not going there!*

With my remaining strength, I slashed out at him with my claws. I didn’t even get close.

“I’ll be waiting for you, little Illusia. Don’t disappoint me.”

He raised his sword scabbard and all, bringing it down on my head. Another jolt of intense pain shot through my skull. Everything went dark.

## Chapter 3: The 100-Legged King

### Part 1

I OPENED MY EYES to sand stretching in all directions. The landscape seemed unfamiliar, but that was due to my low angle of observation. My cheek was pressed against the ground. I sat up and spat out a mouthful of sand.

I forced myself to think. I remembered the blond guy knocking me unconscious. But...I was alive. *He let me go? Why? Oh, that's right—Nina! Where's Nina?!*

The instant I remembered Nina, all the blood rushed to my head, clearing out the remaining fog. Even if the man left her alone, she might already be dead from the Dragon Scale Powder. “*Raaaaaaaaaar!*” I roared, swinging my neck around to survey my surroundings.

(“*No. Move.*”) A hostile Telepathy message came from behind me. I froze. The only person who used this method to speak to me was Ballrabbit, but why did it sound so malicious?

I turned slowly. Adoff sat there, cross-legged with a conflicted expression. Ballrabbit had its ears wrapped around his neck. Despite the seriousness of this situation, it looked goofy as hell.

Ballrabbit's eyes were fierce. I'd never seen it this angry before, though when it saw me, it relaxed. Its Telepathy message must have been directed at Adoff, not me.

I was surprised Adoff wasn't dead. The man who shared my name had stabbed him in the back—literally. But his wound was closed. Did Ballrabbit heal him?

“*Pfeff!*” (“*You finally. Woke up.*”) Ballrabbit sighed in relief. I was glad to see it was safe. But what about Nina?

(“*...That man. Took her.*”)

Of course. The man hadn't killed me. In fact, he'd demanded I come to the city. Nina was clearly a hostage. This left me conflicted.



He'd attacked and kidnapped her, sure, and from our brief communication I could tell he was a violent brute. Nina would rather die than go behind those walls. All that considered, though...distance from me meant the effects of the curse would ease, and the man could fend off any monster attacks. I wouldn't be surprised if he could hack a giant centipede in half.

And as for Adoff...

*"Pfeff."* (*"Took him. Prisoner."*)

O-okay...

*("He was. Going to. Die. So I burrowed. Underground and. Healed him from. There so that man. Wouldn't see.")*

Ballrabbit sure had a head for strategy. Possibly even better than mine.

I had a feeling Adoff would come in handy. I could ask him about the mysterious man and also about Harunae. He seemed stubborn, but I doubted he felt much lingering loyalty to Blondie. I wouldn't need to threaten him much to get the truth.

Regardless, I checked his status.

***Adoff Ahrens***

***Species: Earth-human***

***Status: Prisoner's Mark, Poisoned (Slight), Cursed (Slight), Paralyzed (Slight), Sensory Downgrade (Slight)***

***Lv: 48/85***

***HP: 57/316***

***MP: 34/98***

*Why the heck does he have so many status conditions?* I'd been in a ton of intense battles, but I'd never seen five concurrent ailments until now. The most I'd ever seen was three from the venomous spider.

*("He was. Going to die. From poison so. I eased it.")* Ballrabbit could treat poison? Maybe it was a side effect from Clean. That was a purifying skill. *("But. He struggled and I. Couldn't hold him. Back. So I didn't cure. Him completely.")*

Impressive. Even in his weakened state, keeping Adoff confined wouldn't be an easy task. The enemy of your enemy wasn't necessarily your friend.

*"Pfeff."* A blue light bloomed from Ballrabbit's body, surrounding Adoff. I recognized it as the magic skill Clean. Ballrabbit was trying get rid of the rest of the poison, now that I was awake to help to keep him still.

"Th-thank you." Adoff tipped his head back and spoke to Ballrabbit. He seemed unsure of how to react to any of this.

*("No. Move. How many times. I have to. Tell you.")*

Adoff faced forward again. He looked as conflicted as ever.

With me conscious, Ballrabbit had no real reason to cling so hard. I could subdue a half-dead soldier. But still, it refused to let go.

## Part 2

I NEEDED TO ASK Adoff what was going on. I gave up on trying to get Ballrabbit to let him go—it wasn't budging. Whatever. We could talk this way. As calmly as I could, I asked Ballrabbit to transmit my messages.

*“Pfeff.” (“Who. Are you?”)*

Adoff said nothing. I worried he was resisting interrogation, but then Ballrabbit sent another message. (*“Talk. Or else he. Can't hear.”*) Adoff wasn't refusing to talk, he was just trying to communicate back to Ballrabbit via Telepathy. I couldn't hear him like that. Ballrabbit could translate, but that was an unnecessary intermediary step, not to mention a waste of MP. Ballrabbit could overhear our conversation—obviously, since we would be thinking whatever we were saying.

After receiving Ballrabbit's message, Adoff looked at me with surprise. “You...can understand me?”

I nodded. *“Raar.”*

“My name is Adoff Ahrens. We received word a dangerous monster was seen outside the city. I was allowed temporary release from detention under the conditions that I hunted you. I'm...a prisoner.” He added that last part reluctantly, like speaking it aloud pained him. Suddenly that weird status condition made sense, though it surprised me. The blond guy seemed way more likely to be a criminal.

*(“The other man. Why you. Turn against each. Other?”)*

Adoff's face sharpened. He bit his lip in suppressed rage, hard enough that he drew blood. “He tricked me. My own self-preservation clouded my judgment...and I made the mistake of trusting that demon.” He slammed a fist to the ground. Then he told us the whole story.

According to Adoff, that blond man was a “hero” and his name shared a provenance with mine. The Illusia flower stood for heroism, apparently. Legend had it that every five hundred years, the lord of all monsters—the Demon King—appeared to terrorize humankind. At the same time, a human would be born in the sacred land called Harunae—one with the power to defeat the Demon King. That human was called a hero. The church used rituals to locate this human in childhood, and

then raised and trained them from a young age inside the church.

Once every five hundred years was a fairly long time. Many people didn't believe the legend, but the church *did* find someone and set him up as a hero. The church's power grew exponentially in the years that followed. Aid and donations from other countries surged, encouraging the church's taste for wealth. The leaders used the hero as a shield, greedily expanding their influence. They granted church offices to their own family members, and although the inpouring of wealth should have increased the standard of living, life got worse for the citizens of Harunae.

Not a single church official had an ounce of benevolence; the hero, raised in the lap of their selfish luxury, rotted on the vine. Years ago, Adoff had realized the disaster this spelled and took the hero on as a student to correct some of the damage. He was met with so much interference from all sides that all he accomplished was making enemies. Four years ago, he challenged the hero to a mock duel in public, hoping to bruise his expanding ego. After the fight, the hero followed local tradition and set off on a journey, along with several companions.

Every year he returned, and every year he had fewer friends. He'd say they died, or got married, or fled the hardships of traveling. Adoff didn't know the details; he'd been under strict orders from the bishop not to meet the hero face-to-face.

"No one doubted him at the time," Adoff told us. "But knowing what I do now, I imagine he killed them."

Adoff described a young girl he'd known who was thrilled to be chosen by the hero. She was popular and well liked around town, and her departure caused a stir, but she still left on the journey with the blessings of her family and friends. The hero racked up good deeds throughout his travels and was welcomed with great warmth whenever he visited home.

Hearing of this, Adoff assumed the hero must have undergone a change of heart. Around the same time, Adoff's brother and fiancée were found dead.

Adoff had spent the few years prior to this demanding reform, and thus the church barely investigated the murders. They accused Adoff himself without even establishing a motive. And so, he was falsely imprisoned.

That was when the hero showed up. It was the first time they'd seen each other in four years. Adoff greeted him coldly, but the hero wasn't angry. He spoke to him gently, promising to reopen the church's investigation into his family's death.

Adoff assumed the hero had changed his ways. He went along with his plan to slay the Plague Dragon, and in the end was cruelly betrayed. Even worse, the hero planned to return to Harunae with news of Adoff's escape, leaving the punishment to fall on his remaining family.

It was a terrible story. Just listening made me so angry that I bellowed and stomped my feet. Each event he described was more outlandish than the one before, but he didn't seem to be lying—anyway, Ballrabbit would've picked any falsehoods out with Telepathy.

Adoff wasn't sure why the hero let me live. His reputation was sure to suffer if the dragon he'd allowed to escape showed up to lay waste to the city, so he must have something up his sleeve. *Unless he was just taunting me, I guess.* What would happen to Nina in Harunae? Blondie was a hero there; he couldn't kill her off in cold blood. But Adoff said he killed his other companions, so he knew how to cover up a murder. I had to save her, no matter how the hero might interfere.

He told me to come in four days at high noon. That was how long I had. I didn't know his plan, but marching on Harunae was way too dangerous. That place was far more populous than Myria's village; my appearance would send it into chaos.

I could Roll there right away and attack him early. Or I could lie in wait and attack once he brought Nina outside the city walls...

The hero had said it took two days to reach Harunae from here. If I used Roll at top speed, I could cut that down to half a day. He'd checked my status, but unless you saw Roll in action, you wouldn't know how it worked. I had the element of surprise.

That didn't guarantee my victory, though. He might kill Nina in the meantime. I could go after them right now, but he'd beat me the same way he did before. I needed to level up, boost my chances, and *then* go to the city.

I wanted to save Adoff's relatives too, but I couldn't make any promises. I was in for enough trouble getting Nina out alive. Defeating the hero might not prevent Adoff's family from being put to death. I

needed to destroy people's faith in this man, completely trash his reputation, and I had no idea how to do that. Adoff's story made it sound like the guy had a lot of practice covering up his evil deeds, plus the support of the church. I didn't see how I could do anything about that.

But we did have one advantage: The hero thought Adoff was dead. I could use that, somehow. Would revealing his lie cast enough doubt to break the public's trust, and would it be enough that the church could no longer defend him? If I timed any of this wrong, it would mean certain death. But if I played it right, Adoff could be my trump card.

*("He gave. Four days. What you. Think?")*

Ballrabbit still had its ears wrapped around Adoff's neck. *Seriously, just let go of him! This dude's as much of a victim as we are!*

"Four days?!"

"Pfeff!"

Adoff tried to stand, but Ballrabbit wouldn't let go. He bobbed his head a bit and stopped struggling.

*"Raar?" What's the big deal about four days?*

*("What's. Happening in. Four days?")* Ballrabbit interpreted for me. It always came off sounding bluntly arrogant, but with the lag it couldn't be helped. *It's not being nasty on purpose, is it?*

"Oh, sorry. Illusia can reach the city within a day riding his Pegasus. And if he rushes the church's preparations, he could have my family executed in four days, maybe five. It was on my mind, that's why I reacted like that."

Four or five days? Didn't the hero say five at first too...?

*"In five days... No, I should do it sooner than that... In four days. Yes, that's better. Four days. Due north from here is the country I was born in. Meet me there in four days, at high noon. The trip is just about forty-eight hours if you hurry."* That timeline matched Adoff's. Could it be a coincidence? *Nah, not with this guy...*

"I wonder if Illusia plans to say that the slave girl committed a crime and have her put to death. Demi-humans are heavily discriminated against in Harunae. It's certainly possible." Adoff spoke apologetically and then quickly lowered his gaze to escape mine.

## Part 3

I DOUBTED THAT the hero had enough clout to murder someone in the middle of town, but if he could have her sentenced to death, I couldn't wait for him to come to me. I had to go to the city.

We needed to leave *right now*. I was bursting with impatience. No point in arriving on the fourth day just because he told me to. If I got there quickly, he might not have time to prepare.

At least...that was my thought process, but Adoff disagreed. When I asked Ballrabbit to tell him my plan, he shook his head.

"Your best chance of rescuing a prisoner is on the day of their execution. Criminals are locked up in the jail until then, and there's no way a dragon could fit down there."

*Hmm, that makes sense.* I could knock away all the guards and lay waste to the jail, but that would mean a lot of casualties. And I might injure Nina in the process, or even bury her under the rubble.

It would hardly be safe to enter Harunae on the day of her sentence, either. According to Adoff, they held executions in the center of the city. The open-air setting meant I could fly down to the town square and grab Nina, but a crowd would restrict my movements. Adoff told me a good chunk of the city's population attended executions.

No matter what, entering a settlement would cause a commotion. Going right into the middle of a city square, during a huge public event, would be even worse; there was no telling what could happen. The soldiers would almost certainly swarm me, sending the crowd stampeding to escape. Children would be crushed to death. How could someone who called themselves a hero allow this?

If I followed his orders, he'd have every advantage. He'd made out like he bore me no ill will, but I didn't believe it for an instant. He was my main obstacle. I had to rescue Nina while dealing with a complete maniac riding my tail.

Realistically speaking, defeating him was impossible. He wildly outranked me in stats, and his powerful skills increased his attack range to the point of absurdity. He had a bunch of bizarre moves he hadn't even used on me yet. He gave Adoff like a million status conditions with

a single hit!

Running away from him could prove to be as difficult as standing my ground. He had his speed, plus his stats, plus a *horse that could fly*, plus magic that boosted his abilities. I could Roll away as fast as I liked, but he was sure to catch me.

In my current condition, I couldn't defeat him. I had four days to grind levels and raise my stats to a fighting chance. Then I'd subdue him, clear Adoff's name, grab Nina, and get the hell out of Harunae. This was my best-case scenario.

Plan B: Evolve into a dragon specializing in speed, rescue Nina, and run. I might risk one strong punch on the hero as a parting shot. That slime in the forest kept saying it only liked fighting weak enemies, so it might be best to make the hero think me more trouble than I'm worth.

The problem with Plan B was Adoff's relatives. I'd be sentencing them to death.

Still, I had to ask myself: Was the best-case scenario even possible? Right now, I was at level 44 out of 75. Thirty-one more levels to go before I could evolve. And the higher your level, the harder it was to earn experience. Could I manage it in four days?

The situation was tenuous, but I couldn't afford to waste time. Luckily, my HP was almost full thanks to Automatic HP Recovery. I was fighting fit to bust my butt leveling up today, tomorrow, and the next day, before I zoomed on over to Harunae.

Most monsters here were easy pickings, perfect for food. The only ones likely to make a dent in my required experience point total were the giant centipede or the red ants. I wasn't even sure if the former was still alive. Last time I saw it, it was overrun by ants.

Fighting those guys could be dicey, but I had to do it. I'd grown so much that if I didn't take on something dangerous now, I'd never improve.



## Part 4

I WALKED THROUGH THE DESERT, sweeping my gaze from side to side, hunting for prey. No joy. I remembered where the anthill was located, but I was hoping I'd get lucky and run into some on the way. *Maybe I should fly to get a better view.*

"Raar!" I roared and came to a halt, stretching out my back and tail. Ballrabbit wrapped its ears firmly around the tip. A few moments later, Adoff hesitantly climbed on as well. One upward thrust helped me get my bearings in the sky, then I flew back down and set them both on the ground.

"Pfeff..." ("Are you. Really looking for. That guy?")

*Yep. That's my best bet. I'm confident, but I need a plan. If I can't win this fight, I've got no chance against that monster of a hero. Just make sure you hide as soon as I spot it.*

"Pfeff..." ("But...")

*Look, I don't want to be rude, but having you there is only gonna make it more difficult. Worrying about you distracts me.*

"Pfeff..." Ballrabbit didn't seem entirely convinced, but it relented. Adoff could handle upper rank C monsters, so I could entrust Ballrabbit's safety to him. He made no mention of it—probably because it was painful to consider—but I was sure he knew I was his family's only chance. He was willing to help any way he could.

I wanted to evolve into a nice dragon next, but I didn't have the time to be picky. A vengeful, violent dragon would actually be of more use than a pleasant one in this scenario. With Rest, maybe I had a chance of becoming some kind of holy dragon? Or maybe not, judging from my starting point.

Adoff had scooted away from me at Ballrabbit's urging, but now he came forward again and asked, "What are you looking for?"

"Pfeff." ("Centipede. Big one.") Ballrabbit answered without even waiting for my response. Adoff's mouth gaped open. He stopped walking. Ballrabbit tugged on him and snapped him out of it, but he continued to look stunned. I didn't blame him. Until today, I would have made the exact same face. Adoff was from Harunae—he knew that

monster.

“Raaar!” I roared and leapt back up into the sky. I spread my wings, squinting against the wind. There was nothing but sand for miles, and in the distance a beautiful lake. *Heh. You won’t fool me again, you stupid slug.*

When I’d flown as high as I could, I saw a section of the desert wavering. *What is that? Oh, wait. That’s not sand.* It was a giant monster the *color* of the sand, crawling along.

I’d found it.

***Species: Giant Sand Centipede***

***Status: Normal***

***Lv: 64/80***

***HP: 463/463***

***MP: 244/244***

***Attack: 332***

***Defense: 301***

***Magic: 201***

***Agility: 242***

***Rank: B***

***Special Skills:***

***Myriapod: Lv —***

***Bug King’s Chitin: Lv 6***

***Earth Type: Lv —***

***Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 5***

***Psychic Sense: Lv 4***

***Resistance Skills:***

***Physical Resistance: Lv 6***

***Magic Resistance: Lv 2***

***Falling Resistance: Lv 4***

***Poison Resistance: Lv 6***

***Paralysis Resistance: Lv 2***

***Confusion Resistance: Lv 2***

***Sleep Resistance: Lv 3***

***Normal Skills:***

***Double Poison: Lv 5***

***Burrow: Lv 6***

***Sand Breath: Lv 4***

***Clay Wall: Lv 3***

***Paralyzing Bite: Lv 2***

***Acid Drool: Lv 4***

***Heat Beam: Lv 4***

***Title Skills:***

***100-Legged King: Lv —***

***King of the Desert: Lv 6***

***Unyielding: Lv 4***

***Tenacious: Lv 7***

***Chaser: Lv 6***

***Final Evolution: Lv —***

*Uh, is it just me, or did it level up since the last time I saw it?* This could be a different Giant Sand Centipede, but its skills were the same. And *God*, did I ever hope there wasn't an entire herd of these things roaming the desert.

So...I guess that meant it survived the army of red ants, and all of its bitten or damaged legs completely regenerated. This thing was a freakin' menace!

It noticed me watching it and lifted its head. We made eye contact, and it opened its huge mouth and gnashed its teeth. Quickly, I descended and landed on all four legs, kicking up a cloud of sand in my wake. I wouldn't be able to withstand a centipede beam from the air.

I turned my head ninety degrees and gestured with my chin, away from the centipede. "*Gaar!*" Ballrabbit nodded and tugged on Adoff

with its ears.

*Will those two be all right? Just watching them makes me anxious.* I supposed I should worry about myself first. I used Roll to dash along the ridge of a large hill where the centipede couldn't know my exact location. Without that, its beam attack would be useless. Normally, I wouldn't be this cautious, but I knew how crazy that thing's range was. Nothing within a mile would be safe if that centipede could fly.

## Part 5

**A**S I ROLLED, I felt an intense pressure building in my wake.

When I was a safe distance from Ballrabbit and Adoff, I dropped speed and made for the shoreline, drawing the centipede along with me.

*“Gggggttttchhhh!”*

This thing was absolutely freakish. I’d figured it’d be an easier fight than the hero, but I might have been slightly hasty on that call. This thing already almost killed me—twice. It had been on my radar since I’d entered the desert, and I knew the risk it posed. I knew its attack patterns and how to avoid them.

I swore this fight would be our last.

Taking on the giant centipede posed three main challenges: its powerful, frequent close-ranged attacks, paired with its high attack ability; its high defense, paired with its special skill Bug King’s Chitin; and its fierce, impossibly long-ranged attack Heat Beam, a.k.a the Centipede Beam.

I’d need counter strategies for these strengths if I wanted to land a decisive blow. I had a plan, but now that it was time to put it into action, I worried if it would be enough. Playing out a battle in your head was one thing, but actually doing it was another. I hadn’t worried about this guy in a while—last time I saw him he was getting chomped on by ants.

I glanced behind me.

*“Gggggttttchhhh!”*

The giant centipede loomed closer, kicking up sand as it went. It was closing in faster than I’d expected. The more I looked at it, the more my motivation shrank, but I had to commit. I couldn’t take my eyes off it. If I wanted to win, I had to face it head-on.

The centipede could use Heat Beam from a distance, but it relied mostly on close-ranged attacks. If I just kept running, I’d exhaust myself. It was time to stand and fight.

Just then, a huge rock loomed in the distance. *That’s it—that’s perfect. I can make it!* A little large for my purposes, but I could still lift

it into the air. I planned to fly as high as I could and then use Nutcracker to bash the giant centipede's head in with the boulder.

Nutcracker was my strongest skill. If it didn't break through the centipede's carapace, nothing in my repertoire would come close. *Don't wimp out. Watch carefully. If you screw up, it'll eat you alive.*

I needed to aim the boulder exactly where I'd left the ground, the spot that the centipede was racing toward, and I needed to do it before the Centipede Beam hit. It took time to charge up, but this was a big rock. Bigger than I'd like. Though maybe bigger was better, in this case. This guy's defense was way too high to settle for less.

I decelerated all at once before I leapt toward the boulder, hitting it hard. The impact rocked my body. Even my brain felt shaken up. I hoisted the rock regardless, kicked off the ground, and then streaked up into the sky. I beat my wings frantically, forcing myself airborne.

*This is as high as I go. No rising farther than this.* The Centipede Beam would take me out if I stalled any longer. I checked the monster's location with my peripheral vision to find it almost directly underneath me, face turned upwards, presumably readying an attack. I was in a prime position to smash its weak point.

The centipede stared me down and unhinged its giant mouth, red light gathering within. That was a Centipede Beam, no doubt about it. Sand Breath or Paralyzing Bite would be so much easier to smash through...but no such luck.

*"Gggggttttchhhh!"*

*"Graaaaaaar!"*

I howled and whipped my wings through the air, trying to slow my descent. *Please make it in time. Please make it in time. I hate Centipede Beam so much!*

I whammed the boulder right at the monster's face, and it opened its big ugly mouth even wider. The red light grew brighter. Instinctually, I knew I wouldn't make it.

*"Graar!"* I kicked off from the boulder and strafed to the side. The rock fell immediately above the centipede's face and hung there, suspended in the burst of red light, before it exploded. I flapped my wings desperately, flipping over in midair to strike the ground with my tail as I landed. *Wow, that was close. I almost hit my head.*

“*Ggttchh!*” The giant centipede swung around, shaking off the broken bits of boulder. It was obviously unhurt, since the beam effectively killed all the missile’s momentum. I was lucky to avoid taking damage, sure. But *damn*, this sucked!

## Part 6

“**G**<sub>GTTCHH!</sub>” No sooner did I get my bearings than the centipede charged. At this point, I only had one real option. Gathering magic energy into the back of my throat, I blew it all out towards the centipede in one huge gust.

“*Graaaaaar!*” The cloud of noxious air pelted the centipede. Diseased Breath took time to set in, but at least it served as a distraction. Using Scorching Breath might be a better choice for my evolution path, but I’d used it before in an attempt to slow enemies down, only for them to charge right through it. A Breath attack wouldn’t do much good against the centipede’s defense, anyway. I’d rather confuse it and risk the potential evolution outcomes. Skill levels didn’t increase that easily, anyway.

**Normal Skill “Diseased Breath” Lv 3 has become Lv 4.**

*...Bro, you always know how to keep me humble. Thanks so much for your support, I hate it.*

Flying into the cloud of noxious air, I kicked the giant centipede in the head, spreading my wings to ride the breeze and get a little distance. The centipede broke through the cloud and came at me. I used Roll and booked it. My one-hit-KO Nutcracker plan was a failure, and worst of all, the centipede would come after me even more aggressively now.

Trying an airborne attack was a mistake from the outset. So was anything involving a risky counter. I couldn’t always predict the centipede’s movements, and now it knew to look out for Nutcracker. I needed a new plan. Everything depended on what the centipede did next, each strategy more dicey than the last. What other choices did I have, though?

I couldn’t contemplate failure. If I failed, the centipede would kill me. It’d shoot a hole right through me with Heat Beam.

“*Gggggttttchhhh!*”

I wasn’t sure if it was because I was tired or because the giant centipede was just losing its mind, but I was having trouble outrunning it. I was trying to give Diseased Breath’s Curse effect enough time to



fully set in, but that didn't look likely at this rate. A large hill rose out of the distance on my left. Okay, perfect.

*All right, I can do this. This time I'll get it.*

I drew on my remaining stamina, putting one last burst of speed into Roll. I didn't have to go far, just enough to pull ahead.

"Graaaaar!" I crested the hill with time to spare, relieved to be momentarily out of reach. I dropped my speed into a sharp turn, running down the hill on the other side, before I curved back. If I timed it right, I'd bounce right into the centipede on the crest of the hill.

This monster's close-ranged attacks had two glaring weaknesses. First, they left it vulnerable for precious seconds at a time. My first few encounters with it were so terrifying that I hadn't noticed, but its movements were very broad. It moved fast, but I could move faster if I was ready.

Second, the centipede was huge, but it attacked exclusively with its mouth. It shot poison, breathed out sandstorms, and paralyzed with its bite. And then, of course, there was the beam attack. It had skills to dig holes and form walls of sand, but it didn't use its body for anything offensive. It just had that tough exoskeleton and ramming speed. Those were nasty, but they didn't measure up to the mouth. When the army of ants surrounded it, it was rendered all but powerless.

So my plan was to run straight toward it on the summit, provoking it into dodging my attack. It didn't know I'd changed direction—I could catch it off guard, if only for a moment. That one moment could make all the difference in a battle of life and death.

With the element of surprise, the best strategy was to dodge, not attack straight on. If I could avoid the head, I could circle around to its vulnerable back. From there, it was anyone's game.

I accelerated, making up for the time lost when I changed direction.

*"Gggggttttchhhh!"*

Its ominous cry came barreling toward me as I ran up the hill. The centipede's enormous head was right in front of me. I'd spent so much time fleeing that my abrupt about-face seemed to confuse it. It stopped for a split second, stunned.

*Now!*

I whapped the peak of the hill with my tail and jumped into the air, seconds after aborting Roll. I spread my wings, drawing eye level with the giant centipede. Damn, it was intimidating up close. *No, don't be scared. Don't be scared!*

*"Raaaaaar!"*

*"Gggggttttchhhh!"*

I shot off a Whirlwind Slash at its eyes, hoping to obscure its vision some, but it barely reacted. Darting aside, I stuck as close to it as I safely could. I didn't want to be within biting distance, but if I gave it the space, it would just shoot a beam at me. I had to gauge this just right.

It gnashed its teeth, trying to grab me. *Gah! Not good.*

Luckily, it used Paralyzing Bite, the easiest skill to counter. It was a dangerous attack, since it could render you unable to fight in one hit, but it lacked the range of a breath skill. The giant centipede was choosing strength over accuracy. It must really hate my guts. *Fine by me, makes it easier to provoke.*

It tracked my movements, lifting its head. God, it was fast. Under normal circumstances it would be impossible to outrun. *C'mon, you have to do this. Victory or death!*

I'd run the scenario over and over in my head. I'd come this far—I had to get behind it now, no matter how it reacted. I blocked its encroaching fangs with my wings, then smacked it in the teeth with my tail as hard as I could, pushing myself forward.

*"Graar..."*

Pain crackled through my wings, but I evaded the attack. I flew higher and made for the centipede's tail. *You can do this.* If I fell, or got pushed off my trajectory, it was all over. It was imperative I make this look easy. I glanced back to find the centipede thrashing its giant body around in an attempt to meet me. Damn, I'd hoped to bait it into using Heat Beam, but I guess I didn't threaten it enough to make it waste MP.

I'd also planned to attack while we passed each other, but I didn't have enough of a window. *Damn it. I knew it was a long shot, but is it actually impossible? I have no other ideas...*

This killed my plan dead in the water. After all my efforts, I had no choice but to retreat. I needed a foolproof way to provoke the damn

thing, some sort of skill...but I had nothing.

Its exoskeleton was crazy tough. A little poke wouldn't do anything, not after it took a Whirlwind Slash to the face with no reaction. *Wait, actually...I do have something. Nothing that could do damage, but it might be annoying.*

I had one skill I'd never used before. Whistle. Intellectually, I knew how it worked. I just had to pucker up and blow out a magic breath. Just like a regular whistle. It hadn't ever struck me as useful, especially in the forest where it would only lure in monsters.

But it *would* get the centipede's attention.

This was my last chance. I had to make it use its Heat Beam.

I turned back toward the centipede, shot it a death glare, and used Whistle. *Phhhh, phht!* Slightly pathetic, honestly, but loud enough to startle.

*"Gggggggttttttccccchhhh!"* The centipede whipped its head up, red light gathering in its mouth.

*There it is! Setup achieved! Ooh, it's mad. It's really mad!*

I couldn't blame it. I dodged its attack *and* whistled right in its face; anyone would get heated. If a Greywolf did that to me, I'd chase it off a cliff.

I flew higher, dropping my speed. I positioned myself above the centipede's tail and hovered. It looked at me and gnashed its teeth in anticipation.

*Here it comes, here it comes.* The Heat Beam was so quick that as soon as it shot off, there was no time to get out of the way. The only way to avoid it was knowing its target and moving aside.

At close range, following the centipede's gaze was easy. And now that I wasn't running for my life, I could devote my full attention to dodging that beam. I had maybe five seconds.

*"Ggggtttcchh!"*

I swung my tail to shift my center of gravity, then spread my wings to propel to the left, putting myself outside of range. The Heat Beam zoomed past on my right, and I felt a searing heat. *Guess it's dangerous even when it doesn't hit you.* This was basically a weapon of mass destruction. I flew a half circle in the air, keeping ahead of the

beam as it followed me. Dodging it from close up was way easier than from far away. Despite that, I couldn't run forever.

"*Raaaar!*" I let out a stream of Diseased Breath, covering my surroundings in the sinister, noxious cloud. The centipede lost me in the murk, but it wouldn't last long. As quickly as I could, I landed beside the centipede's tail. Digging in both sets of claws, I bit into it as hard as I could. I planted my feet in the sand and pushed off into the sky.

"*Graaaaar!*" I flapped my wings for good measure and shot Whirlwind Slash straight downward. I hoisted up the centipede's tail with everything I had.

The Centipede Beam was still clearly visible through the diseased cloud. A hot streak of light. I heaved the centipede's body right into the beam's trajectory. The giant centipede's carapace could withstand a lot, but I'd bet money it would crack under its own attack. Then once I was inside, all I had to do was tear it apart. I could finally, finally do some damage to this thing.

We were on a more even playing field, but I couldn't let my guard down.

I heard an awful *crunch* as the beam hit the centipede's body.

"*Gggggggtttttcccccchhhh!*"

The centipede released a fearsome roar, writhing wildly. I still had my teeth buried in its outer shell, and now my whole jaw felt like it was going to fall off. *Crap, my fangs are stuck and I can't let go!* The monster was flailing so badly, I wouldn't be surprised if my neck snapped.

The cloud of Diseased Breath still hung in the air, lowering visibility, so it was impossible to tell how much damage the Heat Beam did. It thwacked its tail toward the ground, but I managed to dislodge my fangs from the exoskeleton just in time. I kicked away from its tail and immediately jumped into Roll to absorb the impact of my landing. I fled from the thrashing tail, letting its giant body land with a thud.



“Gggh-ghhhchhhh!” The centipede sounded like it was screaming, and at a far louder volume than any other noise it had made before. *Hm? Is it just me, or does it sound farther away? Hang on a second, something’s up here.* Where was the damn thing’s head?

Finally, the dust cleared to reveal the centipede had lost the back third of its body. Now it was flipped onto its back, flailing wildly. A dark green liquid was oozing from its wound, and its multitude of legs frantically scrambled. It was clearly in terrible pain, its movements like a drowning victim desperately reaching for a lifeline. For a moment, they resembled human hands.

I shuddered, trying to shake the image from my mind. It looked like my Centipede Beam plan worked even better than I’d planned. It cracked open the exoskeleton *and* cut it clean in half. That skill’s attack power was crazy high! *Good thing it didn’t hit me.*

## Part 7

**T**HE AMPUTATED LOWER HALF of the giant centipede still flailed aimlessly across the sand, spurting blood, gouging deep furrows in the ground. Right, centipede parts could keep moving without their heads. One small mercy was that it *did* appear to be losing steam.

It'd be real embarrassing to get smacked by a flailing ass. Better to focus on the part of the body with the head still attached. I could tell I did a lot of damage, but the monster was still alive. I needed to finish it off.

***Species: Giant Sand Centipede***

***Status: Fury (Major), Bleeding (Major)***

***Lv: 64/80***

***HP: 132/463***

***MP: 142/244***

Oof. It still had a third of its HP left! I'd expected a slightly more serious status condition, considering it had been bisected, but whatever. As soon as it saw me, it flipped over and made that same creepy noise again.

"Gggggggttttttccccchhhh!" It had totally snapped. And not just, like, literally. This thing was pissed. Another red light gathered potency within its mouth: one more Heat Beam, coming up. I spread my wings and flew straight into the sky. I knew exactly how long it took to charge its attack; I wasn't as frightened as before. I landed right behind its head, out of range. The centipede released the Heat Beam, gouging a worthless furrow in the sand.

*Look at all that MP you just wasted!* Swiftly, it twisted itself around. I leapt into a Roll, beating a retreat. At this point, I could hang back and let it bleed out. It was so angry, no way it was gonna flee. It was a lot slower now that it had lost its tail. I sped up a little, just in case.

As I ran, I glanced behind me. The centipede's mouth was suffused in red light yet again. *Seriously? Aren't you being overzealous? You've got*

*a limit to your MP, y'know. Way to lose your cool, buddy.*

I increased my speed and made a sharp left, drawing circles in the earth as I looped behind the centipede again. The beam chased me, but the steep angles I made meant dodging was easy. I Rolled on over to its fresh wound and attacked.

*"Gggttcchh!"* I gouged into its flesh, causing a fresh spurt of blood. One punch wasn't enough, so I punched it two, three more times. The centipede ran, trying to shake me off, but I didn't let it get away. *Oh, how the tables have turned!* Now I was the hunter.

Despite its injury, it wasn't giving up, and I was barely making a dent in its HP. I was getting tired too. I couldn't keep this up forever. I changed directions to tackle it from behind again, driving it towards that big hill where I'd ambushed it earlier. I sped up to reach the summit, then picked it up in my mouth and leapt into the air.

I'd already successfully put the centipede on a diet by cutting out a third of its body weight, so lifting it wasn't a problem. I could only hold it for a few seconds, but that was all I needed. It plummeted to the ground with a crack, shattering its exoskeleton. I was too exhausted for another fancy maneuver, so I flipped it on its back.

*"G-g-g-ttchh!"* Its creepy noise grew weaker, legs twitching. Its stamina was completely drained. The king of the desert had, at last, lay down to die.

Thinking about it, I'd known this guy for a long time—since my first day in the desert. I hated it, I wished it nothing but ill, but watching its end honestly made me a little emotional. *I'm sure it's only temporary. I'll have no problem finishing it off.*

I jumped into the air and flew straight up, climbing as high as I could. At my peak, I curled my body up into Roll and plummeted straight down, slamming the centipede's stomach with as much force as I could muster.

*Crrrrruuunch.*

**Resistance Skill "Physical Resistance" Lv 5 has become Lv 6.**

The centipede's stomach recoiled, bouncing me backwards. I canceled Roll in midair, skidding back towards the ground. I brushed the sand off myself with my claws and opened my eyes.

I hadn't ripped its exoskeleton off completely, but it was caved in,



its insides spilling out.

**Gained 1536 Experience Points.**

*Oooh, I'd expect nothing less from the giant centipede! Four digits of experience gain!*

**Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 1536 Experience Points.**

*Ahh, that's right. I was so blown away that I forgot about my experience boost. Thanks, Giant Centipede. I hated your guts, but I'm grateful for this.*

**Plague Dragon Lv 44 has become Lv 57.**

*Whoa, I gained thirteen levels!*

**Title Skill "Giant Killer" Lv 1 has become Lv 3.**

**Title Skill "Pest Killer" Lv 3 has become Lv 4.**

*Even my Title Skills leveled up. One of them even jumped two! Wow, I am never doing that again! How am I still alive?!*

**Special Skill "Psychic Sense" Lv 4 has become Lv 5.**

*Ooh, even Psychic Sense increased! Time to check my stats.*

***Illusia***

***Species: Plague Dragon***

***Status: Normal***

***Lv: 57/75***

***HP: 218/365***

***MP: 162/256***

***Attack: 319***

***Defense: 241***

***Magic: 229***

***Agility: 212***

***Rank: B-***

***Special Skills:***

***Dragon Scale: Lv 5***

***Divine Voice: Lv 4***

***Grecian Language: Lv 3***

***Fly: Lv 5***

***Dragon Scale Powder: Lv 5***

***Dark Type: Lv —***

***Wicked Dragon: Lv —***

***Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 3***

***Psychic Sense: Lv 5***

***Resistance Skills:***

***Physical Resistance: Lv 6***

***Falling Resistance: Lv 6***

***Hunger Resistance: Lv 4***

***Poison Resistance: Lv 5***

***Loneliness Resistance: Lv 6***

***Magic Resistance: Lv 3***

***Dark Resistance: Lv 3***

***Light Resistance: Lv 2***

***Fear Resistance: Lv 2***

***Asphyxiation Resistance: Lv 3***

***Paralysis Resistance: Lv 3***

***Illusion Resistance: Lv 2***

***Normal Skills:***

***Roll: Lv 7***

***View Status: Lv 6***

***Scorching Breath: Lv 5***

***Whistle: Lv 1***

***Dragon Punch: Lv 3***

***Diseased Breath: Lv 4***

***Venom Fangs: Lv 3***

***Paralyzing Venom Claws: Lv 4***

***Dragon Tail: Lv 2***

***Bellow: Lv 2***

***Meteorite: Lv 2***

***Nutcracker: Lv 3***

***Human Transformation: Lv 4***

***Whirlwind Slash: Lv3***

***Neckbreaker: Lv 3***

***Rest: Lv 1***

***Title Skills:***

***Dragon King's Son: Lv —***

***Walking Egg: Lv —***

***Klutz: Lv 4***

***Just an Idiot: Lv 1***

***Infighter: Lv 4***

***Pest Killer: Lv 4***

***Safety First: Lv 1***

***Liar: Lv 2***

***King of Evasion: Lv 2***

***Protective Spirit: Lv 8***

***Itty-Bitty Hero: Lv 5***

***Wrongdoer: Lv 6***

***Calamity: Lv 5***

***Chicken Runner: Lv 3***

***Mr. Chef: Lv 4***

***Dastardly King: Lv 4***

***Stalwart: Lv 2***

***Giant Killer: Lv 3***

***Ceramic Artisan: Lv 4***

***Clan Boss: Lv 1***

***Laplace Interference Authority: Lv 1***

*Wow, that was quite a boost. Still...I'm a long way off from the hero's level.*

What were his stats, again? If I recalled correctly, his HP was over 600 and all his other stats were at least 350. My attack power was my only stat even close to resembling his. *And* he had a bunch of swords. Those boosted his strength to well over 400, surely.

I had no choice but to level up more. I doubted any other nearby enemies rivaled the giant centipede, meaning my only option was to fight a group of lesser but still powerful monsters. Which left me one potential target: the red ants.

I felt sort of bad, invading their nest to wipe them out, but I couldn't think of anything else. They were nasty enemies too, so I couldn't go in unprepared. It was getting late. I should rendezvous with Ballrabbit and hunt up dinner. I could use a full night of sleep.

*"Raar!"*

*Rest!* Light permeated my form, causing my pain to abate slightly. I wasn't seriously injured, and I still had Automatic HP Recovery, but I wanted to practice. No point having the skill if it barely did anything, and leveling it up would improve my evolution options.

*"Raar! Raar!"*

*Rest! Rest! Ahh, recovery magic is so good. My very soul feels cleansed...though that's probably psychosomatics at work.*

**Normal Skill "Rest" Lv 1 has become Lv 2.**

*All right!* I'd worried my Wicked Dragon status might leave me unable to level up, but that didn't seem to be the case.

## Chapter 4: The Red Ants' Nest

### Part 1

I FIRED UP PSYCHIC SENSE and started back. I doubted Ballrabbit and Adoff had gone far. I sped along with Roll and then took flight to locate them from the sky. On my way, I spotted a three-headed camel resting near some cactuses. An inseparable pair, as usual. I could sneak up on it with a Whirlwind Slash and bring it back as an offering to Ballrabbit and Adoff.

*Sorry, three-headed camel. It's survival of the fittest out here.*

When I took to the sky again, I caught sight of a dirty bog in the distance. That was slug territory, though it was a clean lake last time I saw it. Mirage must have worn off while I was fighting the giant centipede. Maybe Ballrabbit and Adoff were there?

It was as good a landmark as any, and the slugs might make good fodder too. Could they handle those together? Ballrabbit was so clever that it wouldn't surprise me at all. I drew closer and had my suspicions confirmed: Ballrabbit and Adoff were, in fact, waiting for me at the bog. Ballrabbit had purified a portion of the muddy pond, giving them fresh, clean water to drink.

Adoff turned around at my approach. "You're back! You must have leveled up, then."

Hearing someone else talk about levels was weird. The hero had View Status, so maybe Adoff learned about them from him. He continued, "Allow me to be honest... This thing you're doing? It won't work. You can't reach Illusia's level in a matter of days. He's a powerful man. I held back when I fought him, but you saw for yourself. Cowardly tactics were my only chance of survival."

Adoff would be right under normal circumstances, but I had the Walking Egg skill to boost my experience. If I put my life on the line and ambushed the red ants' nest, I could make it. Then all I'd have to do was catch the hero off guard.

It'd be hard to explain to Adoff, though, especially considering I'd need Ballrabbit as an intermediary. He knew about levels, so he likely knew about skills, but I couldn't be sure. Was it possible that humans knew who the Divine Voice really was? There was still so much I didn't fully understand.

"Let me handle this," Adoff pressed me. "You want to rescue the catgirl, right? Illusia thinks I'm dead. I'll wait until the citizens are gathered in the town square, then expose him for who he is. Not even the church will be able to protect him after that."

*I realize we have the same name, but can you stop saying Illusia, Illusia, Illusia? Hearing my name attached to all those awful things makes me sick to my stomach.*

"Listen, Dragon. Just wait for me in the desert. I promise, I'll bring her back."

*I'd love to do that, dude! Believe me, if I thought it'd work, I'd take you up on it in a second.* But it wouldn't be that easy. If Adoff returned to Harunae alone, he'd stroll into the center of town as a wanted criminal. They wouldn't let him get a word in before throwing him back into the dungeon, never mind letting him make a public address.

Adoff likely believed I had no chance of victory if I went to Harunae. He wanted to avoid panic, I was sure, but I also sensed he felt some measure of obligation to me. The thing was that the hero would come for me regardless. It didn't matter where I was.

I'd have no Plan B if I let Adoff fight for me, so we'd be clean out of options if it went wrong. I hardly wanted to inflict my presence on a crowded city either, but what other options did I have?

"*Graah.*" I spat out the cactus and the camel from my mouth. Using Roll meant I hadn't been able to carry them on my back, so now they were coated in saliva. Oh well. It'd burn off when I roasted them.

"Is that..."

"*Graar.*"

"For me? Ah...thanks."

"*Pfeff.*"

Neither of them seemed thrilled. *Come on! Aren't you hungry? I'm gonna roast it. I'll roast it, okay!*

I used Scorching Breath, divesting the meat of my spit. Ballrabbit relented and immediately began to eat. Adoff took a tiny bite, seemed to decide it wasn't too bad, and took another.

*"Raar."* I turned to Ballrabbit. *Hey, can you do something for me? Ask Adoff if there's anywhere a catgirl slave can live without danger.*

Ballrabbit tore itself away from the camel's head it was devouring and looked at Adoff. *"Pfeff."* (*"Where can. Nina live. Safely?"*)

"Nina?" Adoff looked momentarily puzzled. "Oh, the girl." He paused. "...Nowhere that I know of."

I knew it. I *knew* it wouldn't be that simple. Rescuing her wouldn't solve our problems. I'd just have to try to evolve past the Dragon Scale Powder—

*"Wait...there might be one place."*

*Really? Why so hesitant? Spit it out!*

Adoff hesitated. "It's just...dragons can't go there."

*Oh. Well...it's sad, but I already steeled myself to lose her.*

Seeing my reaction, he continued. "There's a nearby kingdom called Ardesia. Recently, they signed a treaty with another country with a high demi-human population. They're trying to emancipate Harunae's slaves in order to improve their international relations with that country. If an escaped demi-human went to Ardesia, I'm sure they'd welcome them."

*Hm, I see. That's an option for sure.*

Adoff drew a map in the sand, showing me we'd have to travel through Harunae to get to Ardesia.

*"Raar."* *I need to start planning for the future. If I show my face in Harunae, I can't stay in the desert anymore. I want to live somewhere without many people but with vegetation. The desert is just too inhospitable.*

*"Pfeff."* (*"He's asking. Where can we. Go. Someplace without many. Humans. With good. Food."*)

*Yeah, food is important.*

Adoff added to his sand map. "If you go east from Ardesia, you'll find a large river. Follow that river and you'll come to a huge forest. Many heroes have reported it's a dangerous place, but it fits all your requirements. Many different countries back out onto it."

A forest along a river? Was that the same one with the black lizard and the orangurangs? The description matched.

“There’s no human population, but I’ve heard rumors that a dangerous class of demons called the Lithovar Tribe dwells there. I haven’t heard many details, other than that the tribe is small. It’s entirely possible you could live there and never run into them.”

*Huh? Oh, maybe I shouldn’t go there after all...*

Everywhere else was filled with people. Staying here meant it was only a matter of time before they sent more soldiers after me. Adoff’s forest was my only shot. Besides, a powerful demon tribe meant plenty of chances to earn experience points.

“You’d need to head in the exact opposite direction to leave the desert from here,” Adoff said. “This might be safer. Admittedly, you’d have to go through a country that’s currently in a civil war...”

*I’d really like to avoid that. I swear, this world is teeming with dangerous places.*



## Part 2

**T**HE NEXT DAY, I woke beside the bog to find my fatigue had burned away altogether. Three days remained until Nina's execution. Between now and then, I had to evolve. Today, I planned to go after those red ants. They were all rank C or above, and there were plenty of them, which meant a veritable treasure trove of experience points. Just one catch: I couldn't rush into their nest without a plan.

I leveled up a ton yesterday, but my stats were still totally dwarfed by the giant centipede's. Three ants at a time were probably the most I could take on safely. Four would be a toss-up. Five, and they'd beat my ass. And if they surrounded me, like they had with the centipede, they'd block my escape and kill me for sure. I still barely believed the silly thing got away in the first place. *Mad respect, honestly.* He'd earned that King of the Desert moniker... Though I defeated him, so what did that tell you?

My plan was to kill the ants outside the nest first, leveling up on the way. Once I evolved and had higher stats, I could make a frontal assault. If they caught on, though, they could overwhelm me fast. They traveled in groups.

I thought back to my past life. To get rid of ants, you laid out poisoned food. The ant who found it would take it back to the nest and kill the whole colony. These guys were obviously on a different level, but if they shared the same instincts, I could use that to my advantage.

I needed a lot of meat for this plan. Luckily, I had a whole giant centipede carcass lying around. I could pull its flesh straight out of the exoskeleton and put together a big old ant trap. My skill Venom Fangs could poison the meat, and then all I had to do was lie in wait beside the nest.

Venom Fangs was at level 3. Probably not powerful enough to kill them, but that suited me fine. I wouldn't get the experience points if the ants died of poison while I wasn't there. Helping Ballrabbit level up had taught me how gaining experience worked in a practical sense.

The poison needed to weaken them, nothing more. Then I could kill them all at once. The fight would be long, and countless things could go wrong. I couldn't ensure that the poison spread throughout the

whole colony, for instance. Maybe weakening foes with poison would mean scoring less experience in the end! I had no way of knowing.

This was a wait-and-see approach, and I might just end wasting precious time. That could be fatal in a situation like this. Basically, this was one risky plan, but if I succeeded the rewards would be great. And it was definitely the safest way to gain experience.

I brought Adoff and Ballrabbit to the site of the giant centipede's corpse. Half of its body was still buried in sand.

"You really defeated the giant centipede!" Adoff yelled in excitement. "You cut it in half!"

*Technically it cut itself in half with Heat Beam. Let's not overstate my abilities.*

A group of those hyena monsters were gathered around the corpse. Eight of them, just like last time. They were called Yain-Yain, if I recalled correctly. There were two large ones, four medium-sized ones, and two babies.

"Ayeee!"

"Ayee-ah?"

The Yain-Yains seemed thrilled. I didn't blame them; they'd come across quite a feast.

"Ayee." The littlest Yain-Yain stared at the giant centipede with huge eyes, pawing at its forehead.

*Crap, it's so freakin' cute. I want one as a pet.*

There was plenty of meat to go around—I could take some without making a dent in their food supply. I didn't want to eat it. I'd managed to choke down the caterpillars back in the forest, but giant centipede? No, thank you.

"Pfeff! Pfeff!" From behind me, Ballrabbit began protesting. ("No! No! Hurry up and. Get away! Don't steal. Food!")

*...Wait, you wanna eat that? You really shouldn't. I bet it tastes like an old boot.*

I ignored Ballrabbit, focusing on the Yain-Yains from afar.

"Ayee-ah..." The baby Yain-Yain stuck its little claws into the centipede, sniffing around.

*That's right, that's right. Eat it! I'll try to keep this walking ball of hunger under control. That's my favor to you.*

“Yachoo!” The baby Yain-Yain sneezed. It frowned, rubbing the hunk of centipede meat on the ground. Its mother shook her head slowly and began to walk away. The medium sized Yain-Yains didn't want to give up yet and lowered their snouts. They all ended up choking just like the baby did. They yipped and spat and chased after their parents.

Wow. I guess the Yain-Yains did *not* like how this thing smelled. Could I even use it to lure the ants in?

## Part 3

**A**FTER THE YAIN-YAINS' DEPARTURE, I moved in to examine the centipede's body. I stuck my snout into its guts. It smelled...nasty. Not overwhelmingly so, but it was distinct. Tasting it would make me gag. It reminded me of how the Amagarashi from the swamp smelled. I had no desire to try it if even the Yain-Yains weren't interested.

Ballrabbit gave it a little lick. Its expression went blank, and it began furiously eating sand. *Really? Was it that gross?*

I began to drag the centipede's body towards the red ants' territory. I clawed out strips of flesh, mincing the meat up into little centipede meatballs. God, this was grotesque. I was beginning to regret this. Was there something else I could use? This really sucked. The odor made me tear up. Even Ballrabbit hated it, but it helped me make the meatballs. For Nina.

It used both its ears to roll them up neatly. Those things were so agile—it was way faster than me. How many should we make? There could be anywhere from a few dozen to tens of thousands of ants in a colony. There was no way I could deal with the latter with a little bit of meat.

The last time I was in the nest, I'd been set upon by about twenty or so ants. The centipede was attacked by more than thirty. So...I was dealing with fifty at the very least.

I didn't see any outside the nest; hopefully that meant there weren't too many. I decided to operate as if there was a solid one hundred. One hundred meatballs, coming up.

*Oof, I got centipede meat between my claws...ugh! I can't get it out! Argh, it smells so bad!*

Would the smell go away once I evolved? *Hey, Ballrabbit? Can you get rid of this smell with Clean?*

Adoff watched our meatball operation with intense confusion, mouth hanging open. "Wh-what are you doing? You're not planning on eating that, are you?"

*Of course not! An understandable conclusion, but no.*

“Pfeff!” (“*Making poisoned. Meatballs. Help us.*”)

“Okay...” Adoff winced but sat down to help. Ballrabbit’s communication skills never ceased to amaze me: Nina warmed up to it right away, and now it had Adoff following its orders. It even wormed its way into the heart of a wicked dragon, making me its protector. Objectively speaking, that last part was the most impressive.

It took us about an hour to roll a hundred meatballs. By the time we were done, both Adoff and Ballrabbit looked like they wanted to die, and I was sure I did as well. But we did it! We finished. Ugh, they *reeked!* I had serious doubts the ants would be interested. They even looked unappealing. Being near them made me want to puke.

If the ants decided they didn’t want them after all that time spent rolling half a giant centipede’s body into meatballs, I’d be pretty pissed. Especially after making poor Adoff help us.

*Shaping the things is only half the battle.* I almost forgot that I had to poison the meat with my Venom Fangs.

Time to try it out. I closed my eyes and pinched my nose shut with two claws, before picking up a meatball and biting in. Let me be real: This was the worst thing I’d ever tasted. Plugging up my nose didn’t so much stop the smell as it force it into my mouth. I felt it, tangibly, in the back of my throat.

I’d eaten *so many* disgusting things since becoming a dragon, so believe me when I say...this was terrible. The nastiest of the nasty, the supreme king of nastiness. Its weird tart flavor made my tongue pucker up.

I suppressed my nausea and gently removed the centipede meatball from my mouth. I lay it on the sand, taking the opportunity to gag. Only ninety-nine to go. *Just gotta power through...one meatball at a time.*

By the tenth meatball I was about to lose it. On the twentieth, I experienced an oral hallucination that it was starting to taste good. I realized on the thirtieth that I was mistaken.

**Normal Skill “Venom Fangs” Lv 3 has become Lv 4.**

On the fortieth meatball, I suspected I was close to achieving enlightenment. On the fiftieth, I was barely hanging on to consciousness. On the sixtieth...I thought I could see through to the

other side.

**Title Skill “Stalwart” Lv 2 has become Lv 3.**

The seventieth meatball had me pondering the saying, “enduring unspeakable hardships.” My sense of taste was absolutely obliterated by the eightieth. On the ninetieth, I worried I might be developing an addictive dependency.

I bit into the final meatball, tears streaming down my face.

**Normal Skill “Venom Fangs” Lv 4 has become Lv 5.**

**Title Skill “Stalwart” Lv 3 has become Lv 4.**

*I did it...I did it! Now to carry them to the nest.*

## Part 4

I ENSURED ADOFF AND BALLRABBIT were at a secure distance before I jogged around the anthill entrance, looking for potential marks. This plan only worked if I found an ant to carry the meatballs inside. I couldn't bring them in myself—there were too many and moving them was cumbersome. I would have rolled them closer to the nest, but I worried it might arouse the ants' suspicions.

I needed a fool prepared to sign their own death warrant, and even that was a toss-up. It was entirely possible they'd take one look at the meatballs, gag, and run off just like the Yain-Yains had. You'd never catch *me* bringing one of these disgusting things back to my queen. She'd probably sentence me to death for treason.

Back in my old world, I remembered seeing ants carry off dead grasshoppers. I ate darkwyrms, but I'd never try a grasshopper. I clung to the hope that ants were way less picky than I was. Besides, I wasn't about to abandon the plan now, after all that suffering. That giant centipede had caused me so much mental damage, even post-mortem.

As I searched, I took inventory of my surroundings. Finally, I spotted a scorpion about three meters long, surrounded by red ants. I ducked behind the shadow of a boulder. The scorpion was gray with two large pincers, set upon by five red ants. I'd had trouble fighting off two of them, and now there were *five*. Even from a distance I could tell this battle formation meant certain death for the poor scorpion. *Why did you let them surround you, dumbass? You gotta fight back before that happens!*

The two red ants in the front took turns faking the scorpion out, securing its attention while the others circled around to its blind spot to bite its tail and legs. Then, once it was focused on its back, the remaining ants pounced. In no time, they had the scorpion flipped over on its back, tearing in until it stopped moving.

An ugly battle strategy, but effective. It kept the damage to the group at an absolute minimum. Power in numbers. I checked the scorpion's status.

**Species: Big Scissors**

**Status: Deceased**

**Lv: 28/50**

**HP: 0/228**

**MP: 154/162**

*Gah! They killed a rank C monster in an instant! Should I be picking a fight with these guys? One misstep and I'll end up just like that scorpion. Honestly, in a group they might even be worse than the giant centipede!*

The five red ants lifted the scorpion onto their backs. Any sneak attack I made at this point would backfire on me. They'd rendered a C-rank monster helpless in no time. I didn't want to end up like my dude Big Scissors here. Maybe I had a chance if I didn't let them surround me? Thanks to my post-giant centipede level-boost, my speed was much higher than the red ants' speed. If push came to shove, I could escape with Roll or by flying.

The red ants had a long-ranged skill called Clay Gun, but I could counter that with Whirlwind Slash. I could finish off two or three at a distance and then just pummel the rest.

*All right, let's do this.*

I flew out in front of the red ants and shot off a Whirlwind Slash. It was imperative that I knock off as much HP as I could while they were still burdened under the dead scorpion's weight. If I was lucky, I'd kill one right off the bat.

*"Kktch!"*

*"Kkttch!"*

*"Ktch, ktch!"*

*"Kktch!"*

*"Kkktch!"*

The red ants fell into scrambling panic. *Sorry, friends. I don't want to bother you while you're getting dinner, but I have no choice!* I had to steel my nerves and attack when they were most vulnerable. *Forgive me, red ants!*

Four of them immediately dropped the scorpion. The final one



waited a beat too long, and the Big Scissors fell right on top of it.

*“Kkkktch!”*

I doubted that would be enough to kill it, but it *did* render it immobile. Big win for me. I turned to the other four and launched a Whirlwind Slash at the one in front.

*Damn it, they’re more agile than I expected. That one dodged twice now.*

*“Kkkktch!”*

*“Kkkktch!”*

The two ants in front chattered, throwing balls of bright red sand at me. Clay Gun. I leapt backwards to avoid it. It was way easier to move when I wasn’t stuck inside their nest, so evasion was no trouble.

The remaining pair fired off their own Clay Gun attacks. I jumped back even farther, but they changed their trajectory immediately, forcing me to guard with my wings.

Agh, this was too many Clay Guns all at once! At least their MP was low. Despite their Regenerate skills, if they kept shooting at me, eventually they’d lose both their ability to recover and to attack. A dilemma, but the perfect opportunity for me to conserve my own MP and let them drain theirs.

I focused on avoiding the clay bullets while dropping the frequency of Whirlwind Slash. This turned out to be a mistake.

*“Kktch!”* One of the ants dashed towards me at full speed. *Whoops.*

*“Raaar!”* I roared and blasted it with three Whirlwind Slashes in succession. It dodged the first one but got tripped up by the second which slowed it down. The third hit it at full force, knocking it off balance. *Just as planned.*

While I was focused on that ant, the other three spread out. I assumed they were planning a pincer attack. I thought back to my fallen compatriot, Mr. Big Scissors. The ants came at me from straight on, the left, and the right. The spaced attack meant I had to target them each individually with a separate Whirlwind Slash. They were real snappy at battle formations.

I turned and retreated, occasionally hurling a Whirlwind Slash behind me. Clay bullets smacked my wings and tail. *Eh, whatever.* A bit

of damage was to be expected. As long as I didn't take a square hit, I'd be fine. The fourth ant—the one I'd knocked down—got up and took another shot as it ran toward me.

*Damn it, I wanted that one to stay down.* I couldn't let this four-on-one fight go on any longer. The ants would use their superior numbers to wear me down. They launched Clay Gun attacks from every direction; dodging one left me vulnerable to another. I evaded and attacked from behind, doing my best to whack the others away with my wings and tail.

Okay, this wasn't going great. I could use Roll to escape and regroup, but that would use up time and stamina. I couldn't waste this prize opportunity, and definitely not with the clock ticking down to the execution.

The ants held a wide berth from each other. I could take one down with brute force, no problem. I liked the odds of three-against-one a lot better. *Divide and conquer.*

I curled up into a ball and Rolled. The ants sped up in anticipation I'd make a break for it. I made a wide curve, then zoomed straight towards the two attempting to flank me on my right.

*"Kkkтчh!"* They shot Clay Gun bullets, which I could avoid but at the cost of losing valuable time. I couldn't let any of the other ants jump in. I Rolled faster, letting the bullets bounce off me. I rammed the ants full-force, knocking them around like bowling pins. I tackled them once, twice, and again in midair. Ant legs flew everywhere. I managed to squash one almost completely.

*"Kttтчh!"* The flattened ant spat out fluid, hitting the ground hard. I attacked mercilessly, until—

**Gained 416 Experience Points.**

**Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 416 Experience Points.**

**Plague Dragon Lv 57 has become Lv 59.**

*All right, one down!* Perfect. The only downside was I still had to focus on them one at a time.

*"Kтчh!"*

*"Kkkтччh!"*

*“Kttchh!”*

*Oh, crap.*

The other three surrounded me while I was concentrating on killing the first ant. I was back in Big Scissors territory. I increased my speed, trying to break away from their formation, but before I could accelerate fast enough, they hit me with Clay Gun from all sides. Dodging would slow me down even more; I had to eat it and refuse to let them keep me in check.

I kept running, firing off Whirlwind Slash at each of them. While they were focused on evading, they couldn’t shoot me. And they were *finally* running out of MP. *Come on, morons. You don’t even have that much to begin with! Why are you wasting it all?*

That was close, but the ants were at their limit. I hit the one flanking me from behind with a Whirlwind Slash, knocking it over.

**Gained 400 Experience Points.**

**Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 400 Experience Points.**

**Plague Dragon Lv 59 has become Lv 60.**

*All right, smoked another one! Now there’s just two left, and their MP is basically gone. I can win this with a punch-out. All together now!*

I dropped my speed and watched as the ants desperately tried to compensate. They couldn’t rely on Clay Gun anymore, pivoting to close-ranged attacks. My deceleration probably made them think their position was favorable.

They fell for my trap, closing in on me. I screeched to a halt, hitting them from up close with Whirlwind Slash.

*“Kkkttch!”* One ant tried to run, taking the wind blades full-force and losing its legs in the process. It skidded and fell, stomach dragging over the sand.

**Gained 400 Experience Points.**

**Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 400 Experience Points.**

**Plague Dragon Lv 60 has become Lv 61.**

I leapt at the remaining ant. I could take this one hand-to-hand. I dodged a bite and aimed a punch at its neck. My claws dug into my

target with a nasty crunch.

**Gained 416 Experience Points.**

**Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 416 Experience Points.**

**Plague Dragon Lv 61 has become Lv 62.**

The ant’s head flew off, falling behind me.

**Normal Skill “Neckbreaker” Lv 3 has become Lv 4.**

*Sweet! A skill level-up.*

Four ants were dead, and I was at level 62. At this rate, I only needed twenty more to hit my evolution max. Time to go collect that ant pinned under Big Scissors and pivot to my centipede meatball plan. I used Roll to go back the way I came, until I found the scorpion’s body with the ant flailing beneath it.

*“Kkkтч! Kтч!”*

*Phew, it didn’t escape.*

Man, it was lively. I lifted the dead scorpion off of it like the helpful dragon I was.

*“Kkt—”*

*Sorry. I’m not one of your red ant friends.*

*“Kktтч!”*

The ant scurried off with a loud cry. I leapt to follow, smacking it once, gently, and tossing it into the air. I leapt round, grabbed it by the back, and kept flying, dragging it behind me.

*“Kkkkkttтчhh!”*

I knew it was cruel, but those were the breaks. Ants left trails of pheromones to remember the path they came by. If I carried it, it might not be able to find its nest. I had to give it a chance to leave its scent in the sand. I dragged it all the way over to the mountain of meatballs, tossing it down beside the centipede’s carcass. Then I Rolled some distance away to see what it would do.

It sat up, rubbing gingerly at its legs. Maybe it was checking itself for injuries. I mean, I *had* dragged it like a sack of potatoes. It was lucky it still had all its limbs. After that, it wandered over to check out the meatballs, giving one a sniff before rearing back sharply.

*Aw, crap. No? C'mon, little guy. It tastes better than it smells! I mean, I never wanna taste it again, but I'm sure it'd be a delicacy somewhere! Pick it up, pick it up! Please! You're my only hope!*

The red ant grabbed one of the meatballs in its mandibles and lifted its head. Slowly, it began making its way back to the nest.

*Yes! I breathed a sigh of relief.*

**Title Skill “Dastardly King” Lv 4 has become Lv 5.**

*Oof, another nasty skill increase right before my evolution. Eh, you win some, you lose some.*

## Part 5

I TAILED THE ANT and its centipede meatball with utmost care. I had to be sure it made it back to the nest. The red ants weren't pushovers, but this one was weakened. If another monster caught it on its way home, all my hard work would be wasted.

Watching the little guy's laborious trudge across the sand, I couldn't help feeling sorry for it. It was working so hard to bring dinner home to its friends. It must have been overjoyed at the sight of that giant meatball pile. Jackpot!

I shook my head, dislodging my thoughts. *No, no. You've got to let it do this, or you won't level up. Focus on what you need to do. You need to beat the hero!*

There was no other way. The ants were my only chance. The giant centipede was gone, and I didn't have time to go hunting for slugs. Taking on a nest was way more efficient than finding one monster at a time.

*Hm? Am I seeing things, or is the ant starting to walk funny? It dropped the meatball. Hey! Are you okay? What is it, your leg? Is your leg messed up?*

The red ant regained its bearings and picked the meatball back up. I was relieved, but I couldn't shake my uneasiness. Had dragging it done too much damage? It might not make it back to the nest on its own in this state, and forget about handling potential monster attacks along the way.

After a moment's hesitation, I walked up to it. It put the meatball back down, watching me warily.

*"Kktch! Kktch,"* it shouted at me. Mad about the whole nearly ripping its legs off thing, probably.

*"Raar!"* I used Rest to give it a couple HP.

*"...Kktch?"*

I did it again. And again. Light surrounded its segmented body. My Rest skill only had a slight effect, but if I used it enough, it added up. The ant stared at me with extreme skepticism. I quickly used Roll

and backed off, worried I'd tipped it off that something weird was going on. From its perspective, I'd come out of the blue, healed it, and then zoomed off for no reason, all after being the one who pinned it under the scorpion and dragged it around the desert in the first place. Yup, guilty-ass behavior however you sliced it.

The red ant was still just a bug in the end, though, so it picked the meatball back up. *Thank goodness you're an ant with ant instincts.*

Continuing behind it, my Psychic Sense pinged something nearby. It was hiding in the ground, directly in the ant's path. It had noticed us, and I felt a strong surge of magical power. It was plotting something, and the red ant was completely oblivious.

No matter what, I *had* to make sure that centipede meatball made it back to the nest. Redirecting the ant would take too long. I had to catch up so I could deal with any threats head-on.

The red ant saw me closing in at top speed, panicked, and ran. *Hey, don't do that! I'm trying to protect you! My heart is pure, even though my motives aren't!*

The red ant walked atop the section of sand where I sensed the monster, and the earth caved in. The hole grew larger and larger—until it could have fit about three of me. The ant tumbled down inside, where a huge bug waited. Well, it was huge compared to the ant but much smaller than me. Maybe about nine feet long.

It was a sandy-brown, like the giant centipede, with two big horn-like pincers. Fuzzy peach hair covered its body, and it looked at us with two beady black eyes.

*Judging by this trap...and its appearance...it must be an antlion!*

The antlion stretched out its neck, rattling its pincers and waiting patiently. The ant tried to crawl out, but the sides of the pit were steep, so it wasn't going very well.

I flew down into the pit and grabbed the ant around the middle, flapping my wings. The antlion emerged fully from the sand and tried to poke me with its pincers. I kicked it as hard as I could, using the recoil to escape.

*Oof, the bottom of my foot hurts.* Automatic HP Recovery could take care of minor injuries, but I used a Rest anyway, just to level it up. I flew at low altitude to get us away from the antlion, then landed and

put the red ant back on the ground. *Phew, that was close.*

We were almost to the nest. I doubted it needed my protection any longer, so I let it scurry away.

**Title Skill “Itty-Bitty Hero” Lv 5 has become Lv 6.**

*Wow, I got a boost for that? Pretty lucky, right before my evolution. I should save monsters more often.*

Suddenly the red ant stopped and turned back toward me. *What is it? Don’t tell me you’re gonna leave the meatball after all that.*

“Kktch...” It bowed its head in acknowledgment and then continued on its way.

*Holy crap, I feel so guilty. Sorry, Divine Voice. Can you lower the skill I just leveled up? Let’s just pretend it never happened.*

**Title Skill “Liar” Lv 2 has become Lv 3.**

*That’s not helping!*



## Part 6

**A**FTER SEEING the red ant safely home, I met back up with Ballrabbit and Adoff. Ballrabbit had a strange, bluish-green liquid smeared around its mouth. I bet it had chowed down on some bizarre monster again. Its HP was fine, though, so I wasn't worried. I brought the two of them over to the ants' nest, quickly spotting an area with a ton of cactuses. We could make camp for the night and rest while monitoring the nest.

The plan from here on out entirely depended on whether my poisoned meatballs did their job. If I couldn't use the red ants to level up, I could never hope to match the hero's stats in a mere few days. I'd be forced to shift my plan to saving Nina and fleeing, leaving Adoff's family to their fate.

Still, taking on the red ants meant taking on *all* the red ants. Leveling their home. I couldn't shake that image of the ant bowing to me in thanks.

*I gotta do this. Dragon up, dude!*

I smacked my cheeks, trying to pump myself up. It hurt a little more than I was expecting because of my claws. Ballrabbit watched me through narrowed eyes.

Every now and then, I flew up to check on the anthill. I counted fifteen ants leaving, before they broke off into groups of five. I watched them do this several times, marveling at how organized they were.

Groups of five were probably all they needed—other than the giant centipede, I hadn't seen any other monsters above rank B. Five red ants could take care of C-rank monsters or lower no problem. The Big Scissors incident was proof of that.

Against a giant centipede, five wouldn't be nearly enough. They couldn't outrun it, or break through its exoskeleton. Maybe the real reason they moved around in groups of five was to minimize the chances of the whole colony getting wiped out at once. That made me kind of sad. Did they do it out of instinct or on another ant's orders?

If it was instinct, I could use that against them. Orders would be more dangerous for me. It could ruin my meatball plan entirely. I had a

creeping feeling that they'd fought so fiercely when I entered their nest because they couldn't disobey.

As I watched, several ants returned with spoils of war. A monster that resembled a giant praying mantis and a cactus. This was the first praying mantis I'd seen out here. It didn't look very appetizing, but I wondered how it stacked up in terms of experience. They brought several more cactuses over, probably to store up on water.

Three ants came by with each one carrying a head of a three-headed camel. I wondered where the body was. *I swear, that brand of camel has the worst luck.* I saw an Amagarashi that was still alive, flailing around frantically, restrained by a whole group of ants. *You're just gonna kill it later, right? Put it out of its misery! The damn thing looks too pitiful to stand.*

The red ant population looked to be over a hundred from these observations. More than even two hundred, maybe. I had no way of knowing how big the nest was, and no idea how many were left behind to protect it. The sun began to rise as I was pondering this; the night was over.

I fought the hero the day before yesterday, so now I had until the day after tomorrow. I had to evolve today. I waited impatiently for the ants to bring home more meatballs.

The first one definitely made it, but maybe none of the other ants were interested. It could've said, "Hey, there are a lot more where that came from!" and then the others might have been like, "Are you stupid? Go eat them yourself!" and kicked it out.

I wondered if that first ant died of poison. I should have given it a healthy meatball to lure the others to the mountain. I didn't even think of that, since I'd relied too much on my knowledge of ants from my old world.

Imagining this potential failure made my stomach churn. I landed and put my head in my paws, feeling sick.

"Pfeff." Ballrabbitt looked up at me with concern.

"Raar..." *Sorry, Ballrabbitt. I might've screwed up. I don't know what to do. I might not be able to save Adoff's family. How can I ever explain this to him?*

Ballrabbitt gave me an encouraging pat with its ears.

*Yeah, I know. It's too early to give up.*

Observing the ants all night meant I had a pretty good grasp of their behavior. If worst came to worst, I'd use my knowledge to find an opportunity to strike, picking off twenty of them any way I could.

Lifting my head, I saw a red line spreading across the sand.

*Hm? What is that? Oh, it's the ants. But why so many at once? I thought they only moved in groups of five!* Then I realized: They were off to the mountain of poisoned meatballs. Dinner was served.

## Part 7

**W**HEN THE LINE OF ANTS returned to the nest, each carried a centipede meatball in its mandibles. *I did it. I really did it.*

At the end of the line was a single ant not holding anything at all. I guess that meant there was one more ant than meatballs. Taking that into account—and presuming some ants had stayed behind to guard the colony—I put their number close to two hundred.

I continued to observe the nest. The number of comings and goings decreased. At first I assumed it was a routine staggering, but then more time went by and no one appeared. Did that mean the centipede meatballs were starting to take effect? I didn't want them to drop dead from the poison alone, since I wouldn't get any experience points that way. I only wanted to weaken them. I had to check on the situation in person.

I approached the nest, Ballrabbit and Adoff following close behind. I turned on Psychic Sense and peered into the large, red hole just as two ants came out of it.

*“Kttch!”*

They screamed when they saw me. One of them scuttled back down into the nest, while the other charged me. One to slow me down and one to alert the others. Their movements were slower than usual, energy sapped. It was the poison! It *had* to be the poison. Their physical abilities must have dropped dramatically.

I sent a Whirlwind Slash at the attacking ant. It was a straightforward attack, easily dodged, but it didn't even try. The blades of wind sliced right through its body, and it collapsed. Regenerate kicked in, and it got back up to try again. Well, no reason to waste MP. I folded my wings and lowered my stance. As it struggled to get back up, I lunged, biting into its neck.

*“K-kktch...”*

I flew upwards, then slammed the ant's head into the ground. Fluids burst everywhere, and before long it stopped moving. Yeah, that was way too easy. It was ailing for sure.

**Gained 388 Experience Points.**

**Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 388 Experience Points.**

**Plague Dragon Lv 62 has become Lv 63.**

*Hm, I gained less experience from that one, probably because of the poison. But it's only around a thirty-point difference. That's hardly noticeable.*

No time to worry about that. I jumped down into the anthill.

Currently, I was level 63. The Plague Dragon's MAX Level was 75. I had to gain twelve more levels before I could evolve. *Twenty more ants, and then I'm blowing this ant stand.*

Evolution left creatures weakened in the immediate aftermath, but if the dragon form was strong enough it might cancel out the drop in level. Wait, what if I got way bigger than I expected and couldn't get out of the anthill? I'd laugh long and hard if I ended up stuck down here forever. That sounded like the sort of trick the Divine Voice might play.

I bowed briefly to the dead ant before turning my attention to the nest. *Ballrabbit and Adoff—wait outside like usual. “Raar.”*

*“Pfeff!” (“No! Come. With you!”)*

*It's too dangerous.*

*(“Dark there! Can't see!”)*

It had a point, but I could always use Psychic Sense—

*(“Want help. Save Nina!”)*

Ah, jeez. How could I say no to that? *All right, c'mon. Ballrabbit's Illuminate skill was useful in closed places.*

“I want to help too.” Adoff unsheathed his sword and stuck it into the ground. He heard the telepathy exchange, huh?

*Listen, Adoff...to be perfectly blunt, the red ants are tough. I don't know if you can even take two at once. You're smaller than me, so you'd have an easier time moving through the narrow tunnels, but...*

*(“Adoff. Useless—”)*

*H-heh! Wait! Don't tell him that! I never said he was useless! It's just a numbers thing! I wouldn't want to fight a nest of Adoffs, either!*

## Part 8

I PUT BALLRABBIT on my head and activated Psychic Sense. The anthill was dark, but three of Ballrabbit's Illuminate fireballs guided our way. I felt their heat occasionally as they grazed my forehead; the light they cast was a deep red. My anxiety grew the farther in we went. I remembered thinking about how the walls must have been made by the Clay skill. I scraped a light claw against one. Not even a scratch; they were tough. *Though I guess that's better than fragile and liable to collapse.*

No ants lay ahead. After the two at the entrance, I'd figured they'd be swarming immediately inside, but nope. Nothing.

The path broke into three forks. This was a complex network. Did they make that extra path to confuse me? Maybe they hid because I was too powerful. With so many splits in the road, avoiding me would be easy, and there might be more exits besides. For a split second, I imagined Adoff might draw his sword and go running down one of the tunnels, yelling something dramatic like "I swear to come back alive!" That didn't really happen, of course. *No sense in splitting up.* I stuck my neck down the pathway to the right. I couldn't see or hear anything.

I gathered magic energy in my throat. Straightening my neck and puckering my lips, I blew out a small puff of air: my Whistle skill. I hoped it'd lure them out. *Phhtt, phht!* The silly noise echoed down the quiet red tunnel. I strained my ears, but all I heard was the echo. Oh well, it was a long shot anyway, and I had no time to worry about it. I crept into the rightmost tunnel.

**Normal Skill "Whistle" Lv 1 has become Lv 2.**

*Cool, I guess.* Was there a point to leveling up that skill? It might make a fun hobby someday, at best.

"Are you going that way?" came Adoff's voice from behind me. I shook my head and turned back.

"Raar." I said to him and chose the left tunnel. He followed me as I squeezed through. I didn't have any real reason for choosing this one, other than that Whistle noise might trick the ants into thinking I went in the other direction. That was a distant hope, though. It was essentially a random choice.

Once again, we arrived at another three-lane fork. *Jeez, how big is this nest?* My confusion intensified. Why was it so empty in here? Where in the world had all the ants gone? As I went deeper, I felt a growing presence behind me. Perhaps they were luring me to the center of the anthill.

As expected, I felt the sudden presence of several ants in front of me. They hadn't run away at all; they planned to overwhelm me with numbers. That actually made my job easier. I'd line them up and knock them down.

The tunnel was narrow, which was a double-edged sword: It made movement difficult but also limited the number of ants that could swarm me at once.

*"Kktch!"*

*"Kkkktch!"*

*"Ktch!"*

*"Kttch!"*

*"Kkkkktch!"*

Footsteps approached. Lots of footsteps. I wanted to take them out and max out my levels as fast as possible, but I couldn't be too hasty. Above all else, I couldn't let them surround me. So I'd focus in on one group at a time.

*Hm? I'm getting a weird ping from Psychic Sense.*

It was reacting to something by the opposite wall. Suspicious, I glanced over.

*"Raaar!"* Part of the red wall peeled away to reveal a huge cluster of ants. They'd used Clay to conceal themselves while their comrades blocked me in.

*They got me! I'm surrounded.*

*"Kktch!"*

*"Kkkktch!"*

This couldn't be instinct alone. There was no other explanation: Someone was organizing how they moved. *Damn, there's so many!* Even with so many ants weakened by poison, I didn't like these odds. No point in moping, though. Escape wasn't in the cards.

*“Raaaaaar!” I don’t care how many of you there are! Come at me! I’ll thrash you all to hell and grind your bones into experience points!*



## Part 9

**A** QUICK ESTIMATE told me I was dealing with around eighty ants.

*I swear, you guys are like an army regiment!* I took a deep breath and saw Adoff crouching at my feet. *Good instincts, man.* He'd gotten out of the way, allowing me to get a first strike in. I twisted my neck around to breathe out a wall of flame: Scorching Breath. However, instead of scattering, the ants took the opportunity to pounce.

*"Kktch!"*

*"Kkktch!"*

*"Kktttch!"*

I used the full array of my claws, tail, and wings to fight back. The ants who took damage fell back, switching places with a fresh wave. The retreating ants then used Regenerate to recover. With these numbers, this wasn't a strategy I could beat.

*"Kkktcch!"* An ant bit into my arm and hung on tight. It recognized my distraction and seized the opportunity. Seeing their chance, the rest of the ants swarmed me.

*"Graaaaar!"* I swung my arm, trying to shake off the bite and spreading a wall of Scorching Breath all around me. I slammed my arm against the ground, ant and all, and finally finished it off. One down, way too many to go.

**Gained 360 Experience Points.**

**Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 360 Experience Points.**

At this rate, I wouldn't be able to run even after I got the experience I needed. I'd have to bring the whole nest back with me. Adoff slashed his way through the ants at my feet, keeping them at bay, and doing a decent job of it too. It forced them to split their attention between us. I was intensely grateful.

*"...Excuse me."* Adoff climbed onto my tail and then up to my shoulders, defending me from higher up. *Hey, thanks. You're a big help.* Adoff knocked an ant back, and I skewered it with my claws to pin it against the wall.

**Gained 403 Experience Points.**

**Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 403 Experience Points.**

**Plague Dragon Lv 63 has become Lv 64.**

*All right, I leveled up. It’s all uphill from here, but I’m gonna make it.*

*“Pfeff!” (“Front! Turn front!”)*

I turned quickly, punching away an ant a breath’s distance from my face. I lunged after it to finish it off, but then fresh waves of ants swarmed me from the right and left. I lost my target in the press.

Spreading my wings, I buffeted away ants on either side of me. Those were replaced by new ones, and on and on. I was such an idiot! Weakening them with poison didn’t matter when there were so many to deal with.

The rush stopped for one trembling moment. I stood up straight and dragged in a breath—only to immediately regret letting my guard down. The ants coordinated their movements to jump at me from all four sides, plus the diagonals in between. I made sure Adoff was still on my back before I shot off a Whirlwind Slash at the ant leading the charge. When that didn’t stop it, I swung my claws, staving it off. As soon as it was downed, I faced my next foe.

Adoff was watching my back, but he couldn’t take them all out. They could attack me all at once specifically *because* they slipped through his guard. Five were here now. I prioritized preserving my HP with a volley of Dragon Punches. Then I headbutted the last one, throwing it into the air.

*“Kkktch!”*

*“Kktch!”*

*“Ktch!”*

The ants cried out. The floor beneath my feet shuddered, then sank, swallowing me up. Those coordinated attacks were meant to force me here, to a tunnel made from Clay. I yanked at my feet, trying to pull them out, but they wouldn’t budge. The ants wouldn’t let an opportunity like this go to waste: Yet again, I was surrounded.

*“Kktch!”*

*“Kkktch!”*

They screeched again, and this time the ceiling gave way. Red needles bore down on me. *Damn it. Why are they so good at this?* They caught me between a sticky floor and a ceiling crammed with earthen stalactites. Oh yeah, and there was an angry mob closing in on me. I was in big trouble. Getting my legs stuck was literally the worst thing that could happen.

*I-Is this checkmate?*

“I’m sorry...but I must ask something of you.” Adoff spoke as he faced the gang of ants. “Rescue my family. Make Illusia pay. He can’t be allowed to hurt anyone else.” He broke into a charge that forced his way through, countering ant attacks with his broadsword as he went.

*H-huh? Run the other way, moron! Don’t go through them, they’ll kill you!*

Adoff rushed the advancing battalion. An ant attacked from his blind spot, tackling him hard and throwing him to the ground. Adoff pulled his limbs in defensively and got up, but there was nowhere to go. He was surrounded.

“Decoy!” He intoned a spell. The ants, poised to attack me, abruptly froze.

## Part 10

**E**VERY ANT turned towards Adoff as one. Despite my immobility and all the trouble they went to in getting me stuck, they abandoned me completely.

It had to be Adoff's spell. Decoy. It must force an enemy's attention onto the user. Now that I thought about it, when I first met him, I *had* noticed only him and not the hero up above me. I'd figured Blondie had used Stealth or Illusion, but maybe that wasn't it. Maybe it was Adoff himself.

"Kssst!" The red ants advanced on him. He fought valiantly, but there were far too many of them. An ant grabbed his sword in its jaws, as another climbed up behind him and bit into his shoulder, dragging him to the ground. Why? Why did he go charging in with no reason?!

*He's buying me time. He's giving me a chance to escape the Clay trap.*

I didn't want to waste it, but my legs refused to pull out. Desperately, I used my full strength. It budged the  *tiniest* bit, but there wasn't even a crack in the surrounding clay. Panic flowed over me as I realized how much time I was wasting. It felt hopeless.

*Break, damn you!*

The ants didn't stop when they brought Adoff down, and why would they? He was vulnerable. They could finish him off. One ant, then another, then another piled on him until he vanished underneath a writhing, biting mass.

"Grraaaar!" I smashed my fangs into the clay floor. The shock literally rumbled through my brain, but a crack did form. I bit again, over and over, snapping three teeth off in the process. They scattered, dripping blood.

I stomped on the ground as hard as I could. The crack widened and finally split, freeing me.

"Kktch?"

"K-ktch!"

The loud crack snapped the ants back to reality. Several of them turned towards me. I leapt into the air, thrashing my head, throwing

Ballrabbit off.

“P-pffeff?!”

I curled into a ball and lengthened my neck, opening my mouth wide to grab Ballrabbit before activating Roll. *Sorry, buddy. I don't want to crush you.* The rabbit's Illuminate spell went out, plunging me into darkness. That was fine—I had a good read on where the ants were. I aimed at the bug mountain on top of Adoff, readied to charge it. The question then became...could I bust through?

They had their attention back on me. Even if I *didn't* try to save him, the Decoy spell was broken. It was sink or swim.

I Rolled toward the advancing ants, hugging the wall. It was too dark to judge distance, but I went as fast as I dared, slamming the wall as hard as I could. The impact rumbled through my entire body. I heard a *thud*. The nearby tunnels began to shake. Some of the ants stopped fighting, confused by the noise.

“Kkktch?”

I heard an ant cry out in the darkness, echoing clearly through the tunnels. A section of the ceiling shook, trembled, and fell. It was just a fragment, a lump of red earth the ants fashioned with Clay. Still, it would do damage to anything caught beneath it, and more earth and rocks followed.

“Kktch!”

“Kktcch!”

“Kkktchhh!”

The ants were scattering. *Phew, it worked!* My guess was that with all the added walls and excavation, the ceiling would be unstable. The formation of the needles created gaps, and with them more structural weaknesses. All I had to do was add pressure to those weaknesses, and it all tumbled down.

A huge chunk of rock grazed my shoulder. *Phew! Wow, I'm glad it didn't hit me.*

I needed light. I spat Ballrabbit out, catching it in my hand before sticking it back on my head. Literally sticking, since the little guy was covered in spit. It looked incredibly annoyed but didn't protest, casting Illuminate at once.

I crouched down and ran through the tunnel, dodging fleeing ants and falling debris to make my way to Adoff. The ants were retreating, but one of them stopped, looked me dead in the eye...then pounced.

*“Kttch!”*

I swung my claws, gouging them deep into the ant’s body. The poison may have weakened it, if not the collapsing ceiling, but I killed it in one hit.

**Gained 432 Experience Points.**

**Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 432 Experience Points.**

**Plague Dragon Lv 64 has become Lv 65.**

Another level. I was gaining experience rapidly, but I’d been way off in my estimation of how dangerous this would be. Still, what other options did I have? If given the chance, I’d probably do this all over again.

Adoff lay on the tunnel floor, dirty with blood. The ants around him had scattered, afraid of the crumbling cave walls. His mouth moved, and relief bloomed inside me. He was still alive! No sooner had I laid eyes on Adoff than a huge lump of clay fell straight towards him. I leapt forward to shield his prone form. The lump of clay hit my back, where it exploded into clumps of dirt. I lowered my head and stuck out my tongue, pulling Adoff into my mouth. Then I joined the ants on their exodus.

The tunnel walls could collapse at any moment. We had to get out.

## Part 11

I TOOK AS STRAIGHT A PATH as the falling rocks permitted. The tunnel was so narrow, and that meant the only way to dodge debris was to slow down or speed up. Some rocks I was forced to bat away with my tail.

I could use Roll, but then I'd lose Ballrabbit's Illuminate. I wasn't about to snuff out the lights while bolting down a narrow corridor in the middle of a rock slide. Besides, if the red ants tried to hold me up with Clay, I'd need to see it coming.

Whenever I caught up to an ant, I kicked it and clawed at its back. They were focused on escape, rendering them completely vulnerable to attack. Once I was out of the tunnel, they could resume attacking me as a group; I needed to whittle down their numbers as much as I could while I had the chance.

*"Kktch!"*

*"Ktch!"*

My claws flashed through the underground, hacking, killing. I leveled all the way from 65 to 69. This was risky business—getting too absorbed in fighting the ants would be fatal. I was always a hair away from falling rubble. *But I need this experience!* Evolution was getting closer and closer, and my stats were going higher and higher too. I'd worried I might struggle without Adoff's sword, but if anything, it had gotten easier to fight. I was growing stronger.

In a lucky break, half the ants fled in the opposite direction when the tunnel began to collapse. Many were caught in the cave-in, drastically slashing down the grand total I'd need to defeat. I came to a corner guarded by a large ant. It stared me down, ignoring its fleeing comrades. Once I got past it, I would be beyond the cave-in. After that, I'd be vulnerable to the ants regrouping and attacking me en masse.

Another ant stepped in front of the big one.

*"Kkktch."* The newcomer ant let out a noise, as if to say, "We'll get buried if we don't run!" The bigger ant didn't budge. Its companion gave up on convincing it; it even shook its head. It took its place beside the bigger one, and the two of them turned towards me.

*“Kktch.”* This time the big ant spoke. The other one said nothing. Weirdly, I got the impression the bigger one was smiling. *You know, making human expressions just makes my job harder, dude!*

*“Pfeff?” (“Need. Translation?”)*

*No, thanks.*

I checked their statuses. The smaller one was level 19 and the bigger was level 39. A soldier and a captain, standing back-to-back.

*“Kkktch!”*

*“Kktch!”*

The rookie and the captain shot a coordinated Clay Gun. Defending myself with my wings would block my vision, but if I swung out with my tail, I'd throw myself off balance and reduce my speed considerably. Taking the hits on the chin would leave an opening for them to charge me.

*“Pfeff!” (“Use wings. Guard!”)*

*But I won't be able to see! They'll get me!*

Wait, Ballrabbit could read my thoughts. It told me to guard with my wings even *after* hearing my logic. I did as I was told.

*“Pfeff!” (“Big one. Jumped! Wings blocked. Aiming. Right shoulder! Other aiming. Left leg!”)*

*Oh! Thank you!* Ballrabbit must be using Telepathy to read our enemy's thoughts. No need to worry about sneak attacks now. I could sense the rookie's location by sound alone. It seemed to be running around, deliberately in fact, hoping to make as much noise as possible on purpose. Bait, to keep my attention off its captain.

Worst case scenario, I'd eat the rookie's attack. I jumped off the ground, gliding over its head, feeling its teeth graze the bottom of my foot. *Missed me!* I tucked my head in to avoid scraping the ceiling, then reared my shoulders back to get my wings behind me.

*“Kktcch?!”*

The captain's attack caught nothing but air. I gouged at its neck with my claws, slamming it into the cave wall with all my body weight. When I pulled my claws out, it hit the ground, faceup.

**Gained 544 Experience Points.**



**Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 544 Experience Points.**

**Plague Dragon Lv 69 has become Lv 70.**

Only five more levels to go.

*“Kkktcchhh!”* The rookie ant screeched and chased after me. I sent a Whirlwind Slash towards the ceiling that brought down a shower of red sand hunks. A harsh crack rang through the tunnel. The walls went still.

**Gained 273 Experience Points.**

**Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 273 Experience Points.**

I felt like a sneaky, no-good jerk, but I turned back around. About twenty ants had escaped the tunnel cave-in. My goal was finally in sight.

## Part 12

**I**F I MADE IT THROUGH THIS, I'd have enough experience. The ants themselves had destroyed the walls to the left and right, leaving me in a long, narrow space. They could only attack five at once, max.

*"Kkktch!"*

The ant chirped, signaling to lead an indiscriminate deluge of Clay Gun bullets. *Ugh, aren't you guys afraid of hitting your comrades or bringing the ceiling down?* Maybe they didn't think they were in any danger. They fired mercilessly, not leaving me the space to dodge. There were so many bullets that Whirlwind Slash wouldn't stem the flow. I knocked bullets away with my arms and my tail, wincing as they exploded. I prioritized protecting my head, where Ballrabbit was perched, but it was only a matter of time before one slipped through.

Adoff was inside of my mouth, so breath attacks weren't an option. The bullets kept coming like machine gun barrage. Once the front line's MP was drained, they fell back, only to be replaced by a fresh wave. *They're gonna wear me down long before they run out of soldiers.*

I checked their stats, willing the ones in front to run out of MP, waiting for my window. *Now!* I lunged forward, just as Ballrabbit grabbed my fangs to swing itself into my mouth. I used Roll and zoomed towards the ants.

*"Kkktch?!"* I blew forward, mowing down the ants in my path. Their only recourse was a clay wall, but since I'd waited until the front line's MP was at rock bottom, they didn't have a chance. The tunnel was too narrow for them to scatter.

*"Kkttch!"*

*"Kkktch!"*

Screams echoed through the tunnel. I felt the give of dozens of bodies squishing beneath me as I Rolled through.

**Gained 392 Experience Points.**

**Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 392 Experience Points.**

**Plague Dragon Lv 70 has become Lv 71.**

**Gained 403 Experience Points.**

**Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 403 Experience Points.**

**Gained 415 Experience Points.**

**Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 415 Experience Points.**

I heard the Divine Voice’s announcements in my head, drunk on my own success. I wanted more. I kept squashing and crushing every ant in my path and hit level 74 in no time.

**Title Skill “Calamity” Lv 5 has become Lv 6.**

*Uh-oh, Calamity leveled up.* Bad timing, but I *did* completely lay waste to an entire tribe’s home, so...not surprising.

*“Kkkktch!”*

*“Kktch!”*

*“Kkctch!”*

Three ants stood in the final line, emitting a chorus of ghastly shrieks. A wall rose in front of them, slowly and laboriously; a far more fragile wall than the ones from the tunnel, presumably eked out with the last of their strength. I stepped on the gas and smashed my way through, toppling it over and crushing the bugs into paste.

**Gained 392 Experience Points.**

**Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 392 Experience Points.**

**Plague Dragon Lv 74 has become Lv 75.**

**Plague Dragon has reached MAX Lv.**

Evolution Requirements have been fulfilled.

Finally, *finally*! I kept Rolling, aiming for the exit. The survivor ants chased me for a few yards, slowed, and then finally gave up.

## Part 13

I KEPT ROLLING FOR A WHILE even after I reached the surface. I wanted to put as much distance as I could between our party and the remaining angry denizens of the anthill. They might be planning revenge. My wings and tail were in rough shape from the barrage of clay bullets, and Adoff was heavily wounded. The priority right now was escape.

After reaching what I judged to be a sufficient distance, I spotted a cactus and Rolled over to it. I could heal Adoff here. We were on top of a small rise. If any monsters approached, I'd see them coming.

I spat Ballrabbit and Adoff out onto the ground.

"Pfeff..." Ballrabbit shook itself, sending saliva flying everywhere. *Ugh, gross.* That stuff smelled so much worse dry than wet. Ballrabbit gave me a look, eyes as flat as a dead fish.

*We need to heal Adoff.* He was more wounds than flesh. His right shoulder took the worst of the bites—it was a mangled mess of meat. Looking closer, that seemed to be the only critical injury. The rest was surface-level damage.

I checked his status, pleased to discover that despite his wounds his HP wasn't too bad. I wondered if Ballrabbit used healing magic on him while they were in my mouth. Whatever the case, I cast Rest once on myself and then three times on Adoff. It completely drained my MP but brought Adoff's HP back near to full.

**Normal Skill "Rest" Lv 2 has become Lv 3.**

**Title Skill "Protective Spirit" Lv 8 has become Lv 9.**

Oh, good. That was a useful one to level up before I evolved. I hoped it opened up my options to include a dragon specializing in white magic, though I didn't even know if that was possible for a Plague Dragon.

I gently grasped Adoff's arm and helped him sit up. *Is it just me, or is there something wrong with his shoulder?*

In my experience, all recovery magic did was give your own natural healing ability a boost. It could heal up wounds, but it wouldn't

regenerate missing limbs. If you sustained a serious injury, your HP would be permanently lowered. Adoff's bites were so severe that chunks of his flesh were missing. The arm was still connected, but I wasn't sure he'd still be able to use it. Adoff might never use a sword again, whether his reputation was cleared or not.

"Pfeff..." Ballrabbit looked up at me, its ears drooping. It was worried about Adoff's arm as well.

"A-arrghh..." A little while later, Adoff finally sat up. He narrowed his eyes, looking down at himself. "I'm still alive," he murmured. "I see you saved me again."

"Raar..." *I should be the one thanking you.* When my legs were stuck and I couldn't move, Adoff threw himself to the wolves to give me time. I'd be dead if not for him.

Adoff glanced around, seemingly searching for something. Was he thirsty?

"Pfeff..." (*"That. Big sword."*) Ballrabbit was on top of it, as usual. I spat the sword out, which I'd swallowed at the same time as Adoff. An unreadable expression swept over his face.

"Thanks." He stood, steadied himself, and hesitantly picked up the sword. Despite the damage to his shoulder, he could still wield the sword passably well. Maybe everything would be all right after all. He swung it one-handed, but when he lifted it up high, his arm trembled. The sword slipped and hit the ground. He crouched to pick it back up, sheathed it, and then slowly sat on the ground. He shook his head.

Well, at least he didn't seem that depressed? The pain in his shoulder left little room for doubt; he wouldn't be using his dominant hand for anything strenuous any time soon.

"I have no intention of serving that country again anyway. This sword is no longer of any real use to me. Much as I would dearly love to run that man through." His words were steeped in sadness, and a heavy silence followed. Ballrabbit read his thoughts, and then its ears drooped. I had no idea what to say to Adoff, either.

"...Can I ask you to get revenge for me?" He must have sensed I was at a loss.

"Raar."

"Pfeff." (*"He says. 'Leave it. To me.'"*)

Adoff's tight expression softened the slightest bit, and he smiled.

## Chapter 5: The Red Ant War

### Part 1

ONCE ADOFF SETTLED DOWN, I told Ballrabbit it was time for me to evolve. Adoff seemed aware of evolution. He knew that once a monster gained enough experience, they could transform into a bigger, more powerful monster.

“Normally, I wouldn’t just stand here and watch as a dangerous wicked dragon evolved, but...well, you’re the only ally I’ve got.” Adoff sat on the sand. He sounded a little sad, and I was sure it wasn’t just his arm. Perhaps it had hit him that he had nowhere left to go.

He spoke of me like I was a last resort, but I didn’t take offense. If someone murdered my relatives and blamed me, forcing me into a coup d’état along with a monster, I’d probably think my life was over too.

*Hey, Divine Voice? I know you’re listening. I’m not gonna ask you to make me a good dragon. But please let me become something powerful enough to defeat that hero. I want to walk through a human village without scaring everyone half to death. I’ve been working nonstop on my Title Skills.*

Above all, my priority was saving Nina. I wasn’t so desperate to make new friends that I was willing to let my old ones die.

#### **Display Evolution options?**

*Been a while since I’ve heard that. Yeah, go ahead.*

There was no telling how many options I’d have this time, but I prayed for at least one that put me on the same level as the hero. I was a B-rank monster right now. With any luck, evolution would bump me up into rank A. I’d never even seen an A-ranker before. I didn’t want to so much as *imagine* a monster ranked higher than the Giant Sand Centipede.

***Future:***

***Nameless Ugly Dragon Rank A***

***Pandora Rank A***

***Ouroboros Rank A***

***Gorgon Dragon Rank A-***

***Demon Chariot Rank A-***

***Present:***

***Plague Dragon Rank B-***

***Past:***

***Young Plague Dragon Rank D +***

***Baby Dragon Rank D-***

***Dragon Egg Rank F***

*Whoa, all A-rank monsters? Sweet.* Still, so much for a bouncing buffet of benevolent dragons. Going by their names alone, I could tell they were all weirdos. Whatever. I'd decided power was what mattered.

What was a Pandora, anyway? Was that even a dragon? Pandragon? If *that* didn't seem like a creature that brought disaster wherever it went, I didn't know what did. It was typical for me to get at least one bizarre choice in every evolution array, but this time I didn't have a single normal option to fall back on. And after I'd leveled up Protective Spirit and Itty-Bitty Hero so much! Did my Plague Dragon status render that stuff worthless? Life was so unfair. *Hey, do I really have to choose between just these? Show me the descriptions, I guess.*

**Demon Chariot: Rank A-. Also known as the Wheel of Nightmares.** Legend has it that this dragon pulls war chariots in the demon realm. Countless needles cover the surface of its body like spikes and tear up the ground where it runs. Lacks wings and is therefore flightless. In exchange, its spikes permit it to run straight up walls.

**Since it can destroy a mountain just by rolling on it, maps will become unreliable.**

*What, are you serious? This guy is a freak!* Just the concept of a dragon like this sent shivers down my spine. If I chose this guy, you could forget destroying just the hero. I'd take Harunae out along with



him, including Nina! Heck, I might destroy the rest of the world while I was at it!

Rolling up and down and all around probably *would* be fun, but I declined.

**Gorgon Dragon: Rank A-** A dragon with five magical eyes. Each eye can cast the curses “Sleep,” “Confusion,” “Paralysis,” “Poison,” and “Petrify,” respectively. Enemies are unable to escape these powerful status effects. The curses will end in their deaths.

As a bonus, this dragon’s mane can be changed into snake monsters.

*Wh-whoa. It’s rank A-, but that seems cool. And strong too... Not sure why it has five eyes, though.* The abilities sounded great, but this might be my final evolution. I didn’t want to have a head full of weird eyes for the rest of my life.

**Ouroboros: Rank A.** A dragon with knowledge of eternity that runs contrary to the logic of this world. Does not age. A double-headed, hermaphroditic dragon. Its existence itself is said to symbolize both eternity and taboo. Defies God in that it controls magic that desecrates life.

Possesses bottomless HP and MP. An expert in recovery magic.

*Finally! Looks like my Protective Spirit grinding paid off! All right! But also—hell no! This is bananas! C’mon, I’m begging for something normal here!*

**Pandora: Rank A.** A dragon fated to bring disaster to the world. Can curse humans to become monsters and monsters to become humans. As compensation for its slow movement, it possesses an incredibly tough body. Upon death, it releases a powerful death curse in a large radius.

A long time ago, heroes would lure a Pandora to the edge of its own birthplace to defeat it.

*Nope. Not a chance. Count me out. But...could I turn myself into a human if I picked that one? Nah, I can’t trust the Divine Voice, not after the history I’ve had with it. Besides, the very first line promises “disaster.” Uh, I guess the next one is the last one.*

**Nameless Ugly Dragon: Rank A.** Never once witnessed by a

human, it lacks an official name. Ugly by every definition. Approaching this dragon is nearly impossible due to its spread of deadly poison and horrible curses. Vegetation decays in its path, while animals fall into a quiet, painless slumber.

The dragon walks on with the dream of meeting creatures other than itself.

At the ends of the world, it will encounter a flower that does not wilt. Only then will it understand the reason for its lonely existence.

It will slowly kneel down before the flower, never to walk again.

*Oh my God? These aren't evolutionary choices, they're video game villains! What, I get to pick between final boss and secret boss? I just pulled a hand of all jokers!*

Picking the wrong thing would mean destroying the entire city of Harunae. All my choices were ridiculously strong...and incredible nuisances. I should have spent more time leveling up my protective skills.

*Demon Chariot, Gorgon Dragon, Ouroboros, Pandora, Nameless Ugly Dragon...*

What was the use of this? I couldn't choose no matter how long I pondered over my options. They all sucked; I was sure I'd regret anything I picked. Evolving forced you back down to level 1, and in unlucky cases your stats would dip down to pre-evolution levels, leaving you barely able to fight. Realistically, I couldn't afford to choose anything without knowing the resulting Title Skills.

But none of this changed the fact that I had to pick. *Do or die, Mr. Dragon.*

I made a petty mental note to go back and demolish the rest of the ants' nest for putting me in this situation, then steeled myself for the worst. Evolving quickly with a crappy result was better than letting Nina die. I was in no position to be picky. My goal was the priority, nothing else.

This was just a hunch, but I bet that this wasn't my final evolution. The Jabberwock option wasn't here, and the Divine Voice hadn't thrown in its two cents. Maybe it just didn't care because they

were all bad options, but you'd think it would have *some* opinion. The Divine Voice never hesitated to butt into my life before. Whatever it was up to, I had to assume it had motives of its own.

When I'd been about to choose Little Dragon, it intervened. When I tried to avoid Young Plague Dragon, it dangled Human Transformation in front of me as bait. The only reason I went with Plague Dragon was because the other options were terrible. It wouldn't suddenly give up on steering me after all that.

The only conclusion to draw was that this evolution wouldn't interrupt my path towards its ultimate goal. All of these options were garbage, so what did it care what I chose? Sure, I was trying to make lemonade out of lemons here, but that was about all I had the agency for.

I had to start eliminating options, even if I hated them all. Okay so...Demon Chariot: no. It was rank A-, and I couldn't picture myself like that at all. I liked Roll, but that wasn't enough to sway me. It was the weakest of the bunch.

Count out the Nameless Ugly Dragon too. It could defeat the hero...along with the entire country in the process. And emotionally speaking, I couldn't bear to spend my entire life alone.

That left the Gorgon Dragon, Ouroboros, and Pandora. The Gorgon Dragon's rank was lower, but its ability to inflict multiple status effects was awesome. I wasn't big on the idea of having so many eyes, but I'd get used to it...maybe? I didn't have time to quibble over stuff like that. That left two more.

The negatives to the Pandora were a slow speed and a powerful death curse. The whole description about spreading destruction everywhere...I didn't want to mess with that. Turning monsters into humans and vice versa was very tempting, but I couldn't be sure what that actually entailed.

*Hmm, wait a second. Hey, Divine Voice? Can you give me the description of Ouroboros again?*

**Ouroboros: Rank A. A dragon with knowledge of eternity that runs contrary to the logic of this world. Does not age. A double-headed, hermaphroditic dragon. Its existence itself is said to symbolize both eternity and taboo. Defies God in that it controls magic that desecrates life.**

**Possesses bottomless HP and MP. An expert in recovery magic.**

Did that mean I could use Human Transformation to my heart's content? It was an expert in recovery magic too, and unlike the other choices, there was no mention of curses or demons. *Wait, what's the thing about "defying God"? Aren't you God, Divine Voice? Like, the literal voice of God? Don't I defy you all the time already?*

It was kind of scary, but thinking about it rationally, this didn't seem to be an evil dragon. Just, like...not especially good from a divine standpoint. Worst case scenario, if my course correction failed, I still had the option of Human Transformation.

It wouldn't make me any more fun to live with. I was bound to look pretty weird, what with my spirit being that of a two-headed dragon. What if my two spiritual heads got into an argument or something? Eh, whatever. I'd call a priest and get an exorcism.

*All right, I've decided. I'm gonna be an Ouroboros.*

"Raaar..." I growled and stepped backwards. My friends knew I was about to evolve, but it would startle them even so. I couldn't predict how big I might get...or how ugly.

Heat bubbled deep down inside my body, before it suddenly jettisoned outward from my head down to the tip of my tail. My entire form felt like it was melting, a similar experience to my first use of Human Transformation. I let myself drift and tried to breathe through the pain. When I began to feel a little better, an extremely weird sensation shocked my system anew.

"Graaaaaar!" That roar was a bit more lighthearted than my old one, but that wasn't the issue. I didn't roar. Something else did.

I opened my eyes to find myself staring into a face. It had bright lavender eyes and long white hair covering its neck. Or should I call it a mane? Two horns protruded from the mane, impressively curved and branching. I assumed my own new face looked just like this one.

I craned my neck, trying to get a look at my back. Huge wings spread out behind me. *Whoops, better close those up.* I felt enormous. My body must have doubled in size. My tail was longer too; I sensed it'd be much more versatile in battle.

I looked down. What used to pass for my arms now more closely

resembled front legs. They'd be harder to use from here on out.

**“Plague Dragon” has Evolved into “Ouroboros.”**

**Special Skill “Fly” Lv 5 has become Lv 7.**

**Special Skill “Dragon Scale Powder” Lv 5 has become Lv 7.**

**Special Skill “Dragon Scale” Lv 5 has become Lv 7.**

**Special Skill “Automatic HP Recovery” Lv 3 has become Lv 8.**

**Gained Special Skill “Automatic MP Recovery” Lv 6.**

*Yeah, keep going! Fly and Dragon Scale went up by two levels, which was great, because my flying abilities were pathetic. Wow, and MP Recovery was at level 6 already? No wonder this dragon was known for recovery abilities. Let's gloss over the Dragon Scale Powder for the moment, though.*

**Gained Special Skill “Twinheads” Lv —.**

**Gained Special Skill “Split Personality” Lv —.**

*Okay, seeing this is kinda freaky.*

**Gained Resistance Skill “Instant Death Resistance” Lv 1.**

**Gained Resistance Skill “Curse Resistance” Lv 1.**

**Due to Title Skill “Dragon King's Son” Lv —, all Resistance Skills less than Lv 5 have increased.**

*Whoa. Things were really moving now.*

**Normal Skill “Diseased Breath” Lv 4 has become Lv 6.**

**Normal Skill “Venom Fangs” Lv 5 has become Lv 7.**

**Normal Skill “Paralyzing Venom Claws” Lv 4 has become Lv 6.**

**Normal Skill “Rest” Lv 3 has become “Hi-Rest” Lv 3.**

**Gained Normal Skill “Regenerate” Lv 5.**

**Gained Normal Skill “Sacrifice” Lv —.**

**Normal Skill “Human Transformation” Lv 4 has become Lv 7.**

**Normal Skill “View Status” Lv 6 has become Lv 7.**

*I recognize a lot of those skills! Whoa, Human Transformation gained three levels?! Maybe I can actually use it now!*

**Gained Title Skill “Foreknower of Eternity” Lv —.**

**Title Skill “Wrongdoer” Lv 6 has become Lv 7.**

**Title Skill “Calamity” Lv 6 has become Lv 7.**

**Title Skill “Dastardly King” Lv 5 has become Lv 6.**

*Oh, come on!*

***Illusia***

***Species: Ouroboros***

***Status: Normal***

***Lv: 1/125***

***HP: 195/332***

***MP: 83/342***

***Attack: 221***

***Defense: 180***

***Magic: 220***

***Agility: 230***

***Rank: A***

***Special Skills:***

***Dragon Scale: Lv 7***

***Divine Voice: Lv 4***

***Grecian Language: Lv 3***

***Fly: Lv 7***

***Dragon Scale Powder: Lv 7***

***Dark Type: Lv —***

***Wicked Dragon: Lv —***

***Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 8***

***Psychic Sense: Lv 5***

***Automatic MP Recovery: Lv 6***

***Twinheads: Lv —***

***Split Personality: Lv —***

***Resistance Skills:***

***Physical Resistance: Lv 5***

***Falling Resistance: Lv 6***

***Hunger Resistance: Lv 5***

***Poison Resistance: Lv 5***

***Loneliness Resistance: Lv 6***

***Magic Resistance: Lv 4***

***Dark Resistance: Lv 4***

***Light Resistance: Lv 3***

***Fear Resistance: Lv 3***

***Asphyxiation Resistance: Lv 4***

***Paralysis Resistance: Lv 4***

***Illusion Resistance: Lv 3***

***Instant Death Resistance: Lv 2***

***Curse Resistance: Lv 2***

***Normal Skills:***

***Roll: Lv 7***

***View Status: Lv 7***

***Scorching Breath: Lv 5***

***Whistle: Lv 2***

***Dragon Punch: Lv 3***

***Diseased Breath: Lv 6***

***Venom Fangs: Lv 7***

***Paralyzing Venom Claws: Lv 6***

***Dragon Tail: Lv 2***

***Bellow: Lv 2***

***Meteorite: Lv 2***

***Nutcracker: Lv 3***

***Human Transformation: Lv 7***

***Whirlwind Slash: Lv 3***

***Neckbreaker: Lv 4***

***Hi-Rest: Lv 3***

***Regenerate: Lv 5***

***Sacrifice: Lv —***

***Title Skills:***

***Dragon King's Son: Lv —***

***Walking Egg: Lv —***

***Klutz: Lv 4***

***Just an Idiot: Lv 1***

***Infighter: Lv 4***

***Pest Killer: Lv 4***

***Safety First: Lv 1***

***Liar: Lv 3***

***King of Evasion: Lv 2***

***Protective Spirit: Lv 9***

***Itty-Bitty Hero: Lv 6***

***Wrongdoer: Lv 7***

***Calamity: Lv 7***

***Chicken Runner: Lv 3***

***Mr. Chef: Lv 4***

***Dastardly King: Lv 6***

***Stalwart: Lv 4***

***Giant Killer: Lv 3***

***Ceramic Artisan: Lv 4***

***Clan Boss: Lv 1***

***Laplace Interference Authority: Lv 1***

***Foreknower of Eternity: Lv —***

Aaand down go my stats. Ugh, it feels lousy seeing my attack that low. Leveling up was easy this far down the chain, but I didn't have much time, and the hero's stats were all around 600. Could I catch up to that? One small mercy was that I didn't see anything intended for



“desecrating life” or whatever the Divine Voice said. I might learn it at a higher level. Not that I *wanted* to, but I had to admit I was a little curious.

My gaze naturally turned to my new head.

“*Graaar.*” Our eyes locked, and it bared its fangs. Did it see me as a threat? *Its neck is so long, I’m scared. Geh! It bit the tip of my nose! Y-you little—!*

## Part 2

“**R**AAR!” *Why does this thing keep attacking me?*

I used one front leg to grab at my other head, pushing it away. Good thing I had control over my body! Getting eaten alive immediately after evolving would suck.

“Graaar! Raaar! Graaaaaaar!”

*Calm down! Calm down, you moron! I’ll let you go if you promise to stop biting me!*

“Graar...” The other head settled down. Could it understand me? Well, that was a relief. I carefully released my hold.

“Graaaaar!” It went in for another chomp that same second. *What the heck is wrong with this jerk?*

I went back to holding it at arm’s length. I couldn’t afford to let it go. My own damn head was too dangerous to live with. *Looks like I messed up after all.* The Divine Voice was probably laughing its ass off right now. *Ugh, this bloows.*

At least I was safe while I held on to it, so I could see to Adoff and Ballrabbit. I hoped this new, super-weird form wouldn’t freak them out too much. Glancing over in their direction, I saw that Ballrabbit was shaking and its eyes were narrowed.

“Pfeff...”

*Listen, I’m desperate over here!*

Adoff had all his attention on my other head. His hand was poised to reach for his sword. *W-wait! Don’t attack it! Deep down, I’m sure it’s a good dragon! If not, I’ll teach it to do better! Don’t kill my kid, Adoff!*

I might have to cut it off myself if things turned really sour, but this guy was a part of me. It was...one of my heads. I didn’t want to kill it. I needed to exhaust every other option first.

“Grar.” My other head relaxed a bit. Did it sense my intention to cut it off if it kept acting up? *Can I let go of you now?* Cautiously, I did. We stared at each other, before it finally turned away. *This is gonna be exhausting, huh?* It was like getting assigned a seat in class next to a kid you hated. Or a crappy new roommate. Only this was even worse,

because this thing was *sharing my body*!

I wondered, could I use Telepathy on it? The twinheads communicated, but I didn't know how. They had a strong connection, moving in sync. When Ballrabbit used Telepathy, it always made a noise. Did it have to? Was it meant to draw the target's attention?

*Hey, can you hear me?*

The head ignored me. Well, this sucked. Was it even alive? Did it have a brain?

"Are...are you okay?" Adoff hesitantly held out a hand. "Do you recognize me? If you do, make a little noise."

"*Graar.*" I thought Ouroboros's roar was high in pitch, but that must be restricted to the other head. My voice was only slightly higher than the Plague Dragon's.

"Can you not move that head on your own?"

"*Grar.*" I shook my head. *Unfortunately not.*

"Oh." Adoff flinched, pulling his hand back. Ballrabbit's eyes were totally blank.

*Gotta figure out what to do next.*

No way could I go to Harunae with my stats in this state. My recovery abilities, HP, and MP were high, but my defense was low. That so-called hero could finish me off in one hit.

I'd gained another head, but it was basically dead weight. I'd have to seriously consider cutting the damn thing off if it threatened to get in the way during battle.

Back to the anthill, then. I felt bad for the ants, but I needed the experience points from their leader—and there had to be a leader. That was the only explanation for their frankly absurd level of coordination.

My attack power was lower than before, but my stamina had increased by a lot; this would be a much more stable fight. Leveling enough would drag all my other stats up with me. I was an A-rank monster now, and the future looked bright.

I needed Ballrabbit's Illuminate ability to risk going back to the nest. Adoff and the rabbit could rest while I hunted and leveled in preparation. Tomorrow I'd go defeat the head ant and then make for Harunae.

I was counting on Adoff's help, but he'd lost the use of his dominant hand. He could hold things, but forget about swinging a sword. Someone like me could get by without it, but it'd deal a heavy blow to a master swordsman. Though since I was a monster that specialized in recovery magic, maybe I'd eventually get a skill that could restore the full use of his arm.

I should have him wait for us outside the nest. He wasn't *helpless*, but I couldn't count on him to perform the same hat trick from last time. All the same, I didn't want to embarrass him. Should I ask what he thought about it? I doubted he'd insist on coming with if he believed he'd get in the way. I'd only known him a few days, but he was clearly an honorable man. He wouldn't let stubbornness endanger our goals.

*"Graar..."*

*"Pfeff." ("He wants. Know. What do. Next?")*

Adoff held up his right arm. Gnawing on his lip, he slowly shook his head. "I don't imagine I'll be much help. If you wish that I come along regardless, I will...but don't make protecting my life a priority."

*Yeah, that's what I figured.* Leaving him behind was difficult, but it was the smartest play. Standing around alone in the desert wasn't without its risks—plenty of monsters roamed around outside the anthill—but I was confident he could get himself to safety. He'd lost his arm, not his brain.

It was time to go hunting and put this new body to the test.

## Part 3

**“G**<sub>RAAAAAAR!</sub>” I charged across the sand on all four legs, closing in on my prey. I was intent on a three-headed camel—one of the motaricamels.

*“Naarghh! Narrgh!”*

The three-headed camel galloped as fast as it could, which capped at about a tenth of my max speed. I didn’t even need to Roll. While I ran, I struggled to acclimate both to my new weight distribution and to running on four legs.

*“Raar! Graaar! Gaaar!”* My other head was such a buzzkill. If it wanted to make a ruckus that would be one thing, but it thrashed itself around constantly. Running like that was impossible. *Bro, knock it off! This is like having a newborn. It’s always in my way!*

I swiped my claws at the camel’s back. Blood flew.

**Gained 27 Experience Points.**

**Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 27 Experience Points.**

**Ouroboros Lv 1 has become Lv 5.**

Wow, I leveled up a bunch from one three-headed camel! I was low enough that growth should come easy for a while. I could even hit level 40 if my red ant hunt went well; I’d reach my old form’s max potential without much struggle.

*Lemme check to see how much my stats went up.*

***Illusia***

***Species: Ouroboros***

***Status: Normal***

***Lv: 5/125***

***HP: 419/424***

***MP: 430/430***

***Attack: 253***

***Defense: 204***

***Magic: 256***

***Agility: 250***

***Rank: A***

***Special Skills:***

***Dragon Scale: Lv 7***

***Divine Voice: Lv 4***

***Grecian Language: Lv 3***

***Fly: Lv 7***

***Dragon Scale Powder: Lv 7***

***Dark Type: Lv —***

***Wicked Dragon: Lv —***

***Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 8***

***Psychic Sense: Lv 5***

***Automatic MP Recovery: Lv 6***

***Twinheads: Lv —***

***Split Personality: Lv —***

***Resistance Skills:***

***Physical Resistance: Lv 5***

***Falling Resistance: Lv 6***

***Hunger Resistance: Lv 5***

***Poison Resistance: Lv 5***

***Loneliness Resistance: Lv 6***

***Magic Resistance: Lv 4***

***Dark Resistance: Lv 4***

***Light Resistance: Lv 3***

***Fear Resistance: Lv 3***

***Asphyxiation Resistance: Lv 4***

***Paralysis Resistance: Lv 4***

***Illusion Resistance: Lv 3***

***Instant Death Resistance: Lv 2***

***Curse Resistance: Lv 2***

***Normal Skills:***

***Roll: Lv 7***

***View Status: Lv 7***

***Scorching Breath: Lv 5***

***Whistle: Lv 2***

***Dragon Punch: Lv 3***

***Diseased Breath: Lv 6***

***Venom Fangs: Lv 7***

***Paralyzing Venom Claws: Lv 6***

***Dragon Tail: Lv 2***

***Bellow: Lv 2***

***Meteorite: Lv 2***

***Nutcracker: Lv 3***

***Human Transformation: Lv 7***

***Whirlwind Slash: Lv 3***

***Neckbreaker: Lv 4***

***Hi-Rest: Lv 3***

***Regenerate: Lv 5***

***Sacrifice: Lv —***

***Title Skills:***

***Dragon King's Son: Lv —***

***Walking Egg: Lv —***

***Klutz: Lv 4***

***Just an Idiot: Lv 1***

***Infighter: Lv 4***

***Pest Killer: Lv 4***

***Safety First: Lv 1***

***Liar: Lv 3***

***King of Evasion: Lv 2***

***Protective Spirit: Lv 9***

***Itty-Bitty Hero: Lv 6***

***Wrongdoer: Lv 7***

***Calamity: Lv 7***

***Chicken Runner: Lv 3***

***Mr. Chef: Lv 4***

***Dastardly King: Lv 6***

***Stalwart: Lv 4***

***Giant Killer: Lv 3***

***Ceramic Artisan: Lv 4***

***Clan Boss: Lv 1***

***Laplace Interference Authority: Lv 1***

***Foreknower of Eternity: Lv —***

*Oh, hell yes! I'm so glad to be rank A. My stats went way up. At this rate, who knew how strong I'd end up? I picked up the bloodstained camel in my mouth and turned to head back to camp.*

*"Graar!" My other head howled again. What are you doing? A flash of light rolled over it. That idiot just used Hi-Rest for no reason!*

*Doesn't this idiot know we heal with Automatic HP Recovery?! That was a huge waste! Though I guess we have Automatic MP Recovery too. Okay, it's not a big deal, but it's very annoying!*

*If this were an RPG, I'd compare it to people who used high-level magic as soon as they learned it and never once worried about conserving MP. I thought of the twinheads and how they each had their own set of skills. Were they naturally that way, or did they share them out between them? The thought made me uneasy. I need to experiment.*

*"Graar!" I set the camel down and then used Hi-Rest. Nothing happened. I shot my other head a look of pure loathing.*

*"Raar?" It seemed to say, "You need something?" It lost interest quickly and stared off into space while jerking its stupid neck around.*

*Are you for real? This jerk stole my recovery magic?! This sucks! The*



*recovery magic was the whole I reason I chose this form in the first place! I could recover with Regenerate, but any healing of Adoff and Ballrabbit would be completely at my other head's mercy.*

I tried out Diseased Breath and Scorching Breath. No problems there. *That's a relief.* Those two skills were a huge part of my battle arsenal; I couldn't have my other head indiscriminately blasting Diseased Breath everywhere. One less thing to worry about.

*"Graar...?"* It looked at me in outraged curiosity. *It's your fault, you idiot! Don't act like this has nothing to do with you.*

We'd all be in serious trouble if this dummy learned a dangerous skill. The Divine Voice said we'd learn "magic that defies God and desecrates life." If my other head got it instead of me, I was in for a future lineup of solely evil evolutions.

Regardless of my powerful stats, my other head was beyond worthless. I'd wager that red ants were smarter than this guy.

## Part 4

**B**RIGHT LIGHT PRICKED at my consciousness. I sat up to see the morning sun rise at the edge of the desert. Tomorrow was Nina's execution. All my preparations had to be squared away today. I had to hit the anthill hard and bring down all those rank C monsters. I felt awful about it, but between a bunch of ant lives and letting Nina die... Well, it wasn't even a question.

Adoff paused his sword forms. "Are you awake?"

I'd been awake the whole time. Monsters were never far away, and the ants could show up any second to enact their revenge. My biology didn't require sleep to erase fatigue; sitting still was enough. I'd noticed that when I was a Plague Dragon, but as an Ouroboros it was even more obvious.

Adoff was still practicing with his sword. *Old habits must die hard, huh?* Hi-Rest couldn't help him. Now that I had the skill, I knew it instinctively. Rest sped up natural healing processes. The only spell that could regrow damaged body parts was Regenerate, and that only worked on yourself. Maybe eventually I'd learn something that could fix Adoff, but right now I was worthless to him.

Right as I thought that, Adoff chuckled wryly and sheathed his sword. I guess my thoughts showed up on my face? I felt bad for making him self-conscious.

"*Graaaaar!*" To add to the awkwardness, my friendly next-door neighbor let out an ear-piercing scream. *Oh my God, you're like a sitcom with how bad your comedic timing is.*

I gave it a poke. "*Graar?*" It opened its eyes, shook its head, and howled "*Raaaaar!*" Light spread over its neck. Hi-Rest. Again.

*I hate watching it waste MP like that.* Well, whatever. At least we were both healed up. This thing hadn't even let me *eat* last night. Every time I tried, it reached over and stole my food. We shared a stomach, so I wouldn't starve, but *I liked* eating. So long as it was happy, I guess it didn't matter.

*Can you please be cool? I'll give you all my food. Just don't act like a jerk, I'm on my knees here!*

Even with my poisoned meatball gambit, I barely made it out of the anthill alive yesterday. Today I'd lost that advantage, not to mention Adoff's aid. The ants' numbers were down, but if my other head went rogue, we'd both be in big trouble.

Time was running out. I had to pump my stats up as fast as I could. Ballrabbit's MP should be recovered by now, so as soon as it was awake we'd head for the nest.

"*Raar, graaaar!*" My other head nosed at the ground, digging in the sand. I thought of dogs in my old world doing the same thing. Was it trying to bury food? It raised its head, dragging Ballrabbit with it, teeth sunk into its ears.

"*Pfeff!*" Ballrabbit swung in a dizzy circle, its eyes murderous.

*Hey, come on! I didn't tell him to do that! I was gonna wait for you to wake up! He used Psychic Sense all on his own.*

I checked Ballrabbit's status, confirming it was fully recovered. Well, it was awake, so we might as well get going. Grumpiness aside, it seemed well rested.

I planned to stash Adoff somewhere nearby the anthill. He'd said it himself—he'd just get in the way. No reason for him to force himself through his injury.

All I wanted for him was his survival. He *would* come in handy for discrediting the hero, but that wasn't the main reason. We'd spent the last few days fighting alongside each other, and I owed him my life. We were friends. I wanted him to live happily ever after when this was all over.

"*Raar.*" I let out a low noise. He stopped walking, understanding me without words.

"I pray for your victory. And I'm sorry I can't help."

"*Graar.*" *Thanks. Leave the fighting to me.*

"*Pfeff! Pfeff!*" ("*Put me. Down! Put me. Down!*")

My other head had Ballrabbit by the ears again. I guess it liked carrying it around. I wanted to keep it on my good side, but I needed it focused. We couldn't fight with our mouths full. *Hey, dude! Let Ballrabbit go!*

"*Graar!*"

“Raaar! Raaar!” It tried to resist, so I held it down with my front legs and yanked Ballrabbit away, putting it on top of my head. Ballrabbit clung on tight with its ears.

“Pfeff!” (“No! Hate. Him! No!”)

Wow. It was really ticked off. My other head stared sadly. *He likes you, whether you like it or not.*

(“No! Hate!”) Ballrabbit shook its body back and forth as it clung to me. I’d never seen it so angry before. This head was nothing but trouble.

Still, it was a part of my body. It was a strange feeling, having someone you didn’t like inside of you. Maybe we could be friends someday, but right now, all I needed was for it to do what I said.

## Part 5

I DESCENDED INTO the red tunnel. A tense, intimidating silence hung in the air that silenced even my chatty other head.

*“Raar.” Thank you for keeping it down, but can you please watch where you’re swinging yourself? It’s cramped down here. You’re gonna smack your head against the wall. Your horns look strong, but don’t go snapping them off!*

My other head kept giving me coy little glances. It seemed infatuated with Ballrabbit’s Illuminate skill. *Ballrabbit dumped you, y’know. Give it up and focus on the red ants.*

I walked on and on but found no trace of the ants. Did I kill too many of them? The poison wasn’t strong enough to last this long, and all the ants had recovery skills.

They might have predicted my return and holed up somewhere to ambush me, but they’d need a lookout for that. This could be a deliberate feint to make me lower my guard. They could be waiting for me as a group in the very back of the nest.

This was my third trip inside. The first time felt like a million years ago, when I’d hid down here after getting smoked by the giant centipede.

*“Raar?”* My other head made a curious noise and twisted around. Did it notice something? I used Psychic Sense and felt a faint presence up ahead.

It had picked up on the enemy before I did. *Damn it. I have to stay on my toes.*

I assumed any enemy I met down here would be an ant, but the presence I detected was very weak; that was why I hadn’t felt it at first. It moved so slowly that it barely pinged on my radar as a threat. Was it a severely injured ant? That didn’t feel right.

Two ants appeared from the shadows at last. They halted at the sight of me, glanced at each other, and nodded.

*“Kktch!”*

*“Kktch!”*

After making their feelings known, they turned their backs on me. They didn't run, though. They went still.

*"Pfeff." ("They. Surrender.")*

*Huh? Okay, I don't like that. If I don't kill these guys, I can't catch up to the hero in time! What should I do? Just attack creatures that begged for mercy?*

I guess I did it to the three-headed camels all the time. This was no different. Still...I couldn't bring myself to attack.

*C'mon, don't wimp out. You've come this far, and if you don't kill them, you'll never level up. Adoff gave up his sword arm to save you! Nina's life is on the line!*

*"Raar."* I roared and raised my front legs. This battle rested entirely on an opening move. The more I leveled up all at once, the easier time I'd have. Two unresisting ants were a huge stroke of luck, if anything. *This is good! Don't hesitate. Whap one with an instant kill. Once you get one, the next will be easy.*

I braced myself, aiming for the red ant's vulnerable neck. I gathered strength in my back leg.

Both ants swung around.

*"Kktch..."*

*("Queen ant. Very smart. If let them. Go. She give big. Reward. Want bring. Place to. Negotiate. What do?")*

Ballrabbit translated for me. Jeez, maybe they really *were* surrendering. Was the queen their leader? It didn't matter, anyway—whatever she wanted to give me was worthless. I didn't want food, or water, or money. I wanted experience points, and she couldn't just hand me those. Wherever she was, it would be swarming with soldiers, and war would break out the second that negotiations fell through. In a large space with a big enough number, it didn't matter how powerful I was. I couldn't fight an army.

No, I needed to level up and investigate the queen's strength before I did anything else. Should I go ahead and kill these two? No, that didn't work. All the others were waiting for me. If I shot the messengers, I wouldn't even get *near* the queen.

Ballrabbit's Telepathy could see through any lie; she couldn't trick me. The best course was to pretend I wanted to negotiate, then get the

lay of the land. Cowardly? Maybe. It was necessary to catch them off guard.

I had to be cautious, since telepathy might not be foolproof. This could be a trap. For now, though, I should say yes. I needed more information before making any moves.

“Rarr.”

“Pfeff.” (“He says. Take us there. Will decide to. Negotiate. After talking. But condition is. Will bite you. So. If you betray. He can kill. You right. Away.”)

My level was low, but killing those two would change that. I could make a fight work for me, if that’s what they wanted.

And if they accepted my terms—and my bites—I’d know they were serious.

“Kktch.”

“Kkkktch.”

The two ants exchanged a glance, then seemed to relent and moved toward me.

“Pfeff.” (“One. At a. Time.”)

That was crucial. I’d be in trouble if they teamed up against me.

I gave each one a bite with Venom Fangs in turn. Then I ordered them to use Clay Gun against a wall until their MP was drained, which they did. Then I hit them both with a Whirlwind Slash, leaving them weakened. They submitted to it all without complaint.

“Raar.” My other head stared at me throughout the whole operation. *Don’t look at me like that. I’m not doing this because I want to.*

“Kktch.”

“Kkkktch.”

The ants let out pained cries, urging us to follow them. I didn’t need a translation for that. I paid close attention to Psychic Sense as we descended, and the deeper we got the crazier the pings became. There weren’t just one or two ants but *dozens* up ahead. If this was an ambush, I was dead.

I stopped and said, “Raar.”

“Kktch?” One of the ants turned and looked at me. *Ballrabbit, give*

them a message. Tell them to bring their queen to me. Alone.

*("Bring queen. Alone.")*

"Kktch." The ant didn't like my response. I knew it was a tough ask, but I insisted. I couldn't risk going into the center of a huge group.

*("They can't. Make that. Decision. They said. Will go ask. Queen.")*

"Raar." I growled in approval.

One of the ants headed down the tunnel. Roughly five minutes later, it returned with an ant twice the size of the others, its belly swollen and scraping the ground as it walked. It was very slow—it clearly wasn't built for mobility. The queen. She had come alone, just as I asked.

"Kktch." The big ant made a low noise. I checked her status.

***Species: Red Ogre Ant Queen***

***Status: Normal***

***Lv: 31/70***

***HP: 421/421***

***MP: 9/128***

***Attack: 198***

***Defense: 276***

***Magic: 179***

***Agility: 97***

***Rank: B-***

***Special Skills:***

***Earth Type: Lv —***

***Community Spirit: Lv —***

***Pheromone: Lv —***

***Red Sand: Lv —***

***Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 5***

***Resistance Skills:***

***Physical Resistance: Lv 4***

***Normal Skills:***



**Burrow: Lv 6**

**Telepathy: Lv 6**

**Bite: Lv 4**

**Clay: Lv 5**

**Clay Gun: Lv 5**

**Sand Breath: Lv 4**

**Lay Egg: Lv 8**

**Wide Rest: Lv 4**

**Roll: Lv 3**

**Title Skills:**

**Final Evolution: Lv —**

**Ant Queen: Lv —**

**Ruler of Nest: Lv —**

**Many Children: Lv MAX**

*Hmm. Well, she's definitely the queen.* I figured she'd be tough, but her MP was rock bottom. She'd have her legs full trying to heal her soldiers. Her Telepathy skill was high; without it, I doubted she would have asked to negotiate.

She stopped in front of me. Several ants peeked around the corner from behind. An insurance policy, no doubt.

"Kktch." The hostage ant made a quiet noise, as if apologizing for its failure.

*("First. I thank you for. Agreeing to negotiate. I am sure. We have much that we could. Fight over. Let us set those. Grudges aside. Is that. Satisfactory?")*

The queen's message drifted through my head.

*I don't really have a grudge. I don't have time for that. Let's just get to the point.*

*("Mr. Dragon. What is it. You wish? If it is. Food. I shall give all. We have. Then will you let. Us go?")*

*This isn't about food.*

*(“Hmm. Is it revenge for. The last time? The only other things. I can offer are. The nest or my. Babies.”)*

*Your nest or your babies? I don’t need either of those. I’d expected this. I wished I could say yes, but what I wanted wasn’t so simple.*

*I need experience points to level up. And I only have today. If you can’t give me that, then unfortunately I’ll have to take your life and the lives of your servants.*

*(“Ooh, experience. Points! For what. Purpose?”)*

She understood the concept of experience points? Adoff knowing about it was one thing, but an ant? I supposed she wouldn’t last long without it.

*(“You said you need. By today. Is there a battle you. Must fight tomorrow? If so. I can help you.”)*

Oh, interesting. A red ant army behind me when I faced the hero. I played it out in my head. A swarm of ants crashing into Harunae would make a huge commotion, perhaps even large enough to cover me rescuing Nina and Adoff’s family.

How would that stop the hero coming after me, though? He could deal with a bunch of ants. He was only one man, but his skill range was enormous. An enemy with similar stats was my sole hope of taking him down. This wasn’t a power-of-numbers scenario.

My best bet was still to kill the ants.

*(“That is not. Acceptable? In that case. I shall give ten. Of my soldiers. Kill them and. Level up. Whenever. You’d like.”)*

Oh, wow. A tempting offer, and a heavy one coming from a queen. How many ants did she have left?

*(“This is a. Bad time. I don’t have many. To spare. Because you already. Killed them. That is the most. I can give.”)*

No haggling, apparently. She probably didn’t have more than thirty; offering any more would leave her short-staffed. She must know I could kill them all if I wanted to, her included. Was she trying to trick me? Did she think I was stupid for even agreeing to a parlay at all? Perhaps she thought I was beneath her. I wasn’t speaking aloud—she was reading my thoughts. Perhaps she picked up on my hesitation toward wholesale slaughter.

*("The reason I asked. What you want. Was not just. To make. An offer.")*

*Huh?*

*("If you don't agree. To my terms. Do not forget that I. Can make your goal. Impossible.")*

*W-wait, she doesn't mean...?!*

Was she saying what I thought she was saying?

*("If you try to kill. More of my. People than I. Offer then. I will order. Them all to destroy themselves.")*

She had me over a barrel. If I got annoyed and left, I'd have nothing. From what I'd witnessed, battle conditions were just as important to experience gain as who you fought. The whole meatball scenario taught me that. I wouldn't get much experience from killing enemies while they fled, who didn't actively want to fight. She was playing against the odds that I was a rational creature: a classic video game conundrum.

No wonder her soldiers called her smart. *Ten ants, huh?* Tempting, especially if they just lay down before my claws. Would it be enough? My rank was so high now, it was possible my experience point gain had gone down.

The red ant queen stared at me intently while I debated this, seemingly waiting for a reaction. Dithering over this decision made me look weak, but I wasn't good at hiding my emotions. Argh, she could tell what was on my mind by looking at me! Damn it.

Oh, to be my worthless other head, blissfully spacing out. I wondered if the queen had other cards she hadn't played yet. This offer was too cut-and-dried.

If she had some other incredible item, it didn't matter. All I wanted was experience.

Maybe agreeing to speak had been a mistake. Her ability to read my mind put me at a disadvantage. I hadn't expected her to have Telepathy, and I *certainly* didn't think she'd open negotiations by threatening mass suicide.

I shouldn't have told her what I was after so readily. By capping the experience points I stood to gain, she could basically get me to do anything she wanted.

I didn't get her reasoning. Was she bluffing? Or was this really a desperate gambit to save the colony? How did I ever maneuver myself into a position to get outsmarted by an *ant*?

*Hey, Ballrabbit! Can you figure out what she wants with Telepathy? I want to know if she's serious about the whole self-sacrifice thing.*

*"Pfeff." ("She's. Better at it. Than I am. She's. Suppressing her Thoughts.")*

Crap, that's right. Her skill level was higher than Ballrabbit's. She could hear my reasoning process, but I couldn't hear hers. I remembered from Telepathy's description that a user could pick up on a target's strong will. Maybe at a higher level you could sense more subtle emotions.

Should I try a different approach? Dig for info? I didn't think I could trick her. Ballrabbit reading her mind was my only idea.

*("You want. Experience points, correct? I cannot give up. Any more ants, but. I might have something. Else.")* My hesitation brought a new offer to the table, I guess. *("It's a bit. Far away, but. There is another. Nest. How about I tell you. Where it is?")*

*Oh, so she's gonna sell out a different anthill to save her own?* I couldn't risk taking on a nest at full strength. She might be bluffing. While I went out looking for a place that didn't exist, she and her soldiers would be free to flee. I wasn't even sure if Ballrabbit could tell if she was lying.

*An attractive offer, but I can't risk it.*

*("Hmm. In that case. Let me lend you some. Soldiers. Leave me with. Five bodyguards and you can. Take the rest with. You.")*

*Are you sure about that? You said you couldn't spare more than ten...*

*("Not for you to. Kill. Comrades. To help you. A. Compromise.")*

She sounded annoyed. This must be a last resort offer. I wouldn't get anything better by continuing to stonewall.

*("You said you don't. Have much time. Go on and. Leave. I will send my soldiers. Out.")*

*First, bring out your wounded. I'll heal all of them with my recovery magic.*

*("Ooh. Very well.")*

The queen brought out twenty soldiers from deep within the nest, all on the verge of death. They must have all been wounded in the cave-in. Maybe there were more survivors than I'd thought.

The ants approached me hesitantly, and I glanced at my other head. "Raar?" *Don't give me that look. You're the only one who can use recovery magic.* I looked back at the ants. It took a couple cycles of this for it to realize what I wanted. It *really* wasn't very bright. "Raar! Raar!"

It used Hi-Rest again and again. *Slow down, buddy!* Too much was better than not enough in this case. I wanted all the ants at full strength.

"Kktch?"

"Kktcch, kkkktch!"

**Normal Skill "Hi-Rest" Lv 3 has become Lv 4.**

We should get a move on. No telling how far we had to go.

*I know a half-felt apology is worse than none at all, but for what it's worth, Your Majesty...I'm sorry.*

*("Noted. I am doing what. Needs to be done. To ensure. The nest's survival.")*

I turned my back on the queen, setting off with my newfound army, feeling winded. From a purely objective standpoint, she'd walked all over me. She'd forced me to abandon my initial goal entirely, steering me like a big, scaley ship.

I remembered hearing somewhere that you should always open negotiations with a demand for the impossible and then slowly move toward the center. It was pretty weird that she'd offered me such a bad deal initially. Only ten, and then suddenly she turned around and handed me her whole army.

She must have wanted to take on the other nest the whole time. And now she had a dragon to lead her charge, killing two birds with one stone. It was only a guess, of course, but it made sense. *Damn, she really got me!*

Well, one thing was for certain. I wouldn't be making deals with high-level Telepathy users again. At least not until I had Ballrabbit in a position to hit back.

## Part 6

I LEFT THE ANTS' NEST to find Adoff watching over the entrance from afar. He ran over as soon as he spotted me. "Done already? That was fast." The next moment, the army of ants appeared behind me. Adoff froze.

*"Pfeff." ("The situation. Changed. We'll be back. Soon...maybe.")*

Adoff stared at us and nodded, then turned back the way he'd come. I wondered what he thought of this situation. Maybe it was best that he didn't know I'd gotten outmaneuvered by a queen and thus roped into an ant civil war.

Once all the ants were assembled, I circled around and followed from behind. They were the ones who knew the way. The group was about thirty strong—if we'd been enemies, I'd have been in a bad spot. Having them on my side, though, filled me with confidence. Each one was as powerful as a Little Rock Dragon, capable of destroying a village thirty times over.

I certainly never imagined I'd stand with the red ants. This territory dispute must be bad. Was it a personal thing? Did one ant beat up another ant's kid? Or had I unbalanced the desert hierarchy when I killed the giant centipede?

We'd been traveling for a few hours when two ants broke from the group and sprinted ahead. The other ants ignored them. Not knowing what to do, I tried to follow them. The ant making up the vanguard, who I assumed was the captain, screeched *"Kktch, kkkktch!"* at me.

*Yeesh, better stay here, I guess.* The ants had their own way of doing things. They knew best. I didn't protest. A little less than an hour passed, and those two ants—scouts?—returned, reporting immediately to the captain.

*Hey, Ballrabbit. Can you hear what they're saying?*

*("Not. Clearly. Seems they're. Talking. How to. Attack.")*

I was pretty clueless when it came to ant battle strategy. What's more, we couldn't really communicate clearly. Hey, wait a second! How was I supposed to tell my allies and enemies apart? I mean...they were all ants. Could I ask them to draw marks on their backs or something?

The captain came over to me. I guess it had concerns of its own.

*“Kktch, kktch!”*

*Please translate, Ballrabbit.*

*(“Don’t. Understand. Simpler, please.”)*

Dang, even Ballrabbit didn’t understand! The captain drew a circle in the sand with its front leg and tapped it. I got the impression it was saying, “Got it?”

*“Raar.” Sorry, I don’t...*

*“Kktch.”* The captain made an exasperated noise, and recruited an additional ant to mime coming out of the circle. *“Kktch?”*

*“Raar.”* Okay, that made more sense. The captain drew a line this time, then something that resembled a dragon beside a group of circles. I suddenly got it—it was showing me battle strategies. The group of circles must be my ant allies. The captain drew a mass of arrows to indicate the direction of the attack.

It added a triangle, which perplexed me. It re-drew the dragon. *No, that’s not what I don’t get... Oh, okay.* The triangles were the enemy ants. It seemed the plan was to split into two groups and attack from opposite sides. The front line would be split into two groups, luring the enemy ants out of the nest. Meanwhile, the second line would circle around and sneak in behind them.

Those were the captain’s only instructions. It gave me no indication of what would happen once we infiltrated enemy territory, but that must mean we’d need to wait to evaluate the situation on the ground. Or perhaps they weren’t sure what to do with me. Fine by me. I’d follow my instincts.

I didn’t want to squash a comrade accidentally; I hoped we could tell them apart with Telepathy. They positioned me in the center of the squad with the first group. The second group only had five soldiers. *What could five ants do? That’s a little low for an infiltration, isn’t it?* I’d have to trust they knew what they were doing.

They were making noises now that even Ballrabbit couldn’t interpret: They might have been trying to tell it the name of their operation or something else that didn’t translate easily. We walked for a while longer, then stopped. The enemy nest must be nearby. Five ants broke from the group and ran off; I presumed they were the infiltration

team.

Ten minutes passed. Then the captain ant screeched. “*Kktch!*”

The other ants went into a frenzy at the sound.

“*Kktch!*”

“*Kkktch!*”

“*Kktchh!*”

They advanced at an incredible speed, forcing me to run to keep up with them. I soon caught sight of a hole in the ground: the anthill entrance. A group of enemy ants scuttled out of it as we approached. One, two, three, four of them emerged. One immediately raced back down, doubtless off to carry the news. They were under siege.



## Part 7

**I**RAN ALONGSIDE MY UNIT. We ran in blocks of ten on the left, five in the center, and ten on the right. From my place in the middle, I couldn't see any sign of the other unit, but I assumed they were circling around.

Ten enemy ants stood facing us at the mouth of the nest. With our thirty, victory was assured...but I doubted it would be that easy. Backup was certainly on the way.

I wanted as much experience as I could get. I sped up, bypassing my allies to rush the enemy group. Out here in the open air, I didn't have to worry about my movements being restricted. If I got in trouble, I could always retreat and use Regenerate or Hi-Rest. My max HP was high, so I wouldn't be in danger even if they ganged up on me.

Enemy ants charged to counter me. They were split into three units too, probably mirroring our squad. They were likely buying time until reinforcements showed up. They were on the back foot, so they'd be more focused on defense than offense. It made my job easier.

*"Raaaar!"*

*"Kkktch!"*

*"Kktch!"*

*"Ktttch!"*

The three ants lined up side by side, hammering me with Clay Gun. Tactically, I should stop and circle back, but that'd be playing into their hands. They weren't trying to kill me. They wanted to slow me down and keep me from rushing the nest.

I didn't dodge the bullets for that reason, choosing to cross my arms over my chest and take the hits. I hardly felt any recoil this way, and I gave myself space to dodge a more powerful potential attack. I'd have a way harder time doing that if I was already dancing around avoiding bullets. My HP was so high, and my recovery abilities so numerous, that I could eat a ton of damage before it became a problem.

I made sure to protect my head, though. I didn't want Ballrabbit getting smacked off.

“Kktchh?!” The ants, who had assumed I’d try to evade their attacks, took a few uncertain steps backwards. Understandable—they were spraying me with bullets, and I wasn’t fazed at all. Still, after looking at the hunks of bloody scales hanging off my arms and chest, I wondered if I’d made the wrong decision after all.

I had Automatic MP Recovery. I should heal myself. Hi-Rest was more reliable than Regenerate. Unfortunately, a certain idiot was in charge of our Hi-Rest skill.

“Graar.”

“Raar?” My other head stared blankly at me.

*Um, can you heal me, dude?*

“Raar!” It roared, and a cloak of glimmering light swept over me. My wounds slowly began to close.

“Kktch!”

“Kkkktch!”

“Kttcchh!”

The three enemy ants attacked me as a team, only veering off at the last minute. I headbutted the one in the center and whacked the one on the right with my tail, more focused on repelling them than landing a killing blow. I wanted to take them one at a time. With some trepidation, I left the last one to my other head.

“Gaar! Graaar!” It bit into the ant’s belly, slamming it to the ground. *Good work! I guess you aren’t completely useless in a crisis.*

I spread my wings and flew backwards. The two other ants, dazed by my strikes, didn’t follow. I assumed they’d tried to buy time and given up after realizing that it wouldn’t work. I streaked into the air, a much easier feat with my higher Fly skill. I bet I could bust out some complicated aerial maneuvers, but best to save those for later.

“Kkkktch, kktch!”

The ant in my other head’s jaws flailed wildly. I was at such a low level that even a single kill would help a lot. Those other two were bound to call up reinforcements, but this delicious ball of experience points was my priority for now.

“Raaar!” The other head let the struggling monster go, allowing me to catch it in freefall, biting down hard.

*“Kktchh?!”* It made a noise of terrified confusion. *Too bad for you. I’ve got two heads.*

I wanted to use Nutcracker, but the kickback would knock Ballrabbit off my head. I settled for rearing back and swinging down so that I slammed the ant toward the ground.

*“Kttch!”*

I spread my wings and pursued the falling monster down. The second that it hit the ground, I squashed it flat with Roll.

*Crunch!*

Fluids splattered. A few spasms later, it was dead.

**Gained 243 Experience Points.**

**Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 243 Experience Points.**

**Ouroboros Lv 5 has become Lv 15.**

Experience gain was lower at higher ranks, but this was still pretty sweet. I felt myself getting more and more powerful.

*“Kktchh!”* The other two ants resumed using Clay Gun. Again, I blocked them with my arms. I still felt the impact, but this time my scales took no damage. I’d gained ten levels—these guys didn’t stand a chance against me.

*“Kktch!”*

*“Kttch!”* A fresh wave of enemy ants poured out of the nest: reinforcements. Twenty ants so far and more on the way. With numbers like these, they could easily turn the tables and take me down like they’d tried to do to the centipede.

*“Kktch!”*

*“Kktch!”*

My ant allies streamed in from behind to greet the approaching army and threw me right into the middle of the fight.

## Part 8

“**K**<sub>KTCH!</sub>”

“*Kktch!*”

The leader of our unit attacked the enemy unit’s leader, quickly followed by the front line. This tossed us into an all-out fight that confirmed my worst fears immediately—I couldn’t tell ally apart from enemy. I knew the ants right beside me were on my side, but once the two sides crashed together, it became impossible to tell.

Standing in the swirling tumult of battle, I didn’t know what to do. There was no way to tell who was safe to target. I could ask Ballrabbit to try to tell the difference, but that wouldn’t be much help in such a chaotic mass of enemies. There were over thirty enemy ants, and that number kept growing.

We had thirty in our own unit, plus the five ants in the second wave on standby. Unless I pitched in, we’d be completely overrun. My allies were counting on me to do *something*. If I stood here without making a move, we’d all die. I wouldn’t even get any experience, because no way I was taking out this nest on my own.

I hated the idea of causing any unnecessary deaths.

I’d promised the queen, but I also felt the camaraderie of being on the same side. I couldn’t hurt my allies.

Withdrawing from the front lines was my only choice. Inside a pitched battle it was too difficult to tell one ant from another, let alone where they came from.

I took a step backwards, resolving to provide backup until things calmed down. I needed a vantage point that overlooked the whole of the battlefield.

Once I knew who my allies were, I could heal them with Hi-Rest, and if I identified an enemy, I’d toss a Whirlwind Slash in there to gain some experience points. I wouldn’t earn much that way, but every little bit helped.

“*Raar!*” *C’mon, Head Two. Wake up!*

“*Graa?*”

*I can count on you, can't I?*

I headed for the back line to check the situation there. My guys were outnumbered and feeling the pressure, but still focused on the enemy. I stood far enough away that no one took notice.

*"Kktch!"*

An enemy ant leapt toward one of my allies, who responded with Clay Gun. The enemy ant took the bullets in the head, before a second one ran up in its shadow. I didn't hesitate to fire off a retaliatory Whirlwind Slash—a direct hit. The ant rolled several times and came to a halt.

**Gained 126 Experience Points.**

**Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 126 Experience Points.**

**Ouroboros Lv 15 has become Lv 21.**

*Hell yeah! This is so efficient.* Leveling was so easy when you first evolved! I bet I could handle enemy ants on my own with how tough I was getting. Now I'd gained a taste for this new style, I used Fly to get airborne before shooting another Whirlwind Slash. I focused on my attacks, letting my other head provide backup with Hi-Rest.

I used View Status to see who needed healing the most, then used it on enemies to check HP levels. I brought down the lowest with a single Whirlwind Slash.

**Gained 112 Experience Points.**

**Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 112 Experience Points.**

**Ouroboros Lv 21 has become Lv 23.**

**Gained 117 Experience Points.**

**Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 112 Experience Points.**

**Ouroboros Lv 23 has become Lv 25.**

I didn't get much experience from any single ant, but it added up quickly. I was careful to only snipe enemies with low health, since the red ants had the skill Regenerate. They'd surround me if I got sloppy, so I had to be sure that a single Whirlwind Slash could finish them off.

Clay Gun was dangerous, but it also required steady aim, which meant it was far less useful in the heat of a battle; the lack of hits, coupled with my Hi-Rest, meant none of my allies were hurting that much. The steady stream from the enemy nest meant we were still outnumbered, but they'd have to hit their limit at some point. My allies conserved MP whenever they could; my MP reserves, by contrast, were super high. I wanted them to avoid using Clay Gun and Regenerate for as long as possible. I'd handle the healing and long-range attacks until then.

I defeated around twenty ants in this manner, bringing Whirlwind Slash from level 3 to level 5 and Hi-Rest from level 4 to level 6. My own level skyrocketed from 25 to 41. These results were even better than I'd expected, and a huge improvement on what I'd have received if I hadn't let the queen trick me.

The bad news was that at this stage my MP was running low. I was forced to use Hi-Rest and then wait for a while to let Automatic MP Recovery kick in. My troops were relying on my recovery skills, so they were feeling the lack.

The enemy kept coming. We must have taken down at least fifty, but it hardly seemed to matter. How much longer could we hold out? Now that my magic was basically worthless, I decided I'd better head back to the front lines.

As I had that thought, five ants raced up and jumped into the nest. The enemy reacted in surprise—it had to be our second unit. They must have burrowed their way in, waiting for their moment. The enemy ants gave chase, but it was already too late.

*“Kkktcccchh!”* The five ants screamed from the entrance, seconds before it collapsed to cover them in dirt. Several enemy ants were pulled in too, sinking down with our side.

*“Kktch!”*

*“Kkktch!”*

My allies didn't seem alarmed at all that we'd lost the entirety of our strike force. On the contrary, they were elated. I supposed they only cared about serving their queen, and who lived and who died made no difference. It felt odd for me to watch this go down, since I'd brought those poisoned meatballs into their nest and set all this in motion in the first place.

This was favorable for us, but it could only do so much. The ants could Burrow, so they'd probably make a new entrance in no time. Until then, though, we had little time with no reinforcements to take advantage of.

I could take care of the remaining enemies up here, no problem. Forget about the threat of a new entrance for now—my priority was whatever I could do to clean up the battlefield. With their numbers dwindling, the enemy ants' formation would fall apart, and then their guards would drop. Their current movements were so smooth and coordinated that I could barely get a hit in. Ants fighting were almost like dancers.

We had about twenty surviving troops. Five had expired in battle, plus the five that died in the collapse.

The enemy had lost about eighty soldiers. An astoundingly stark difference. We had fought a good fight and had whittled down a tremendous force. I took the opportunity to check my status.

### ***Illusia***

***Species: Ouroboros***

***Status: Normal***

***Lv: 41/125***

***HP: 842/1156***

***MP: 51/1112***

***Attack: 509***

***Defense: 362***

***Magic: 546***

***Agility: 410***

***Rank: A***

***Special Skills:***

***Dragon Scale: Lv 7***

***Divine Voice: Lv 4***

***Grecian Language: Lv 3***

***Fly: Lv 7***

***Dragon Scale Powder: Lv 7***

***Dark Type: Lv —***

***Wicked Dragon: Lv —***

***Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 8***

***Psychic Sense: Lv 5***

***Automatic MP Recovery: Lv 6***

***Twinheads: Lv —***

***Split Personality: Lv —***

***Resistance Skills:***

***Physical Resistance: Lv 5***

***Falling Resistance: Lv 6***

***Hunger Resistance: Lv 5***

***Poison Resistance: Lv 5***

***Loneliness Resistance: Lv 6***

***Magic Resistance: Lv 4***

***Dark Resistance: Lv 4***

***Light Resistance: Lv 3***

***Fear Resistance: Lv 3***

***Asphyxiation Resistance: Lv 4***

***Paralysis Resistance: Lv 4***

***Illusion Resistance: Lv 3***

***Instant Death Resistance: Lv 2***

***Curse Resistance: Lv2***

***Normal Skills:***

***Roll: Lv 7***

***View Status: Lv 7***

***Scorching Breath: Lv 5***

***Whistle: Lv 2***

***Dragon Punch: Lv 3***

***Diseased Breath: Lv 6***



*Venom Fangs: Lv 7*  
*Paralyzing Venom Claws: Lv 6*  
*Dragon Tail: Lv 2*  
*Bellow: Lv 2*  
*Meteorite: Lv 2*  
*Nutcracker: Lv 3*  
*Human Transformation: Lv 7*  
*Whirlwind Slash: Lv 5*  
*Neckbreaker: Lv 4*  
*Hi-Rest: Lv 6*  
*Regenerate: Lv 5*  
*Sacrifice: Lv —*  
*Title Skills:*  
*Dragon King's Son: Lv —*  
*Walking Egg: Lv —*  
*Klutz: Lv 4*  
*Just an Idiot: Lv 1*  
*Infighter: Lv 4*  
*Pest Killer: Lv 4*  
*Safety First: Lv 1*  
*Liar: Lv 3*  
*King of Evasion: Lv 2*  
*Protective Spirit: Lv 9*  
*Itty-Bitty Hero: Lv 6*  
*Wrongdoer: Lv 7*  
*Calamity: Lv 7*  
*Chicken Runner: Lv 3*  
*Mr. Chef: Lv 4*  
*Dastardly King: Lv 6*  
*Stalwart: Lv 4*

***Giant Killer: Lv 3***

***Ceramic Artisan: Lv 4***

***Clan Boss: Lv 1***

***Laplace Interference Authority: Lv 1***

***Foreknower of Eternity: Lv —***

Finally, *quadruple digits*. A-rank monsters were no joke. My attack and magic had surpassed 500, and this much MP meant that I could use Human Transformation for almost twenty minutes. Heck, when you took Automatic MP Recovery into account, I could probably stretch it to thirty.

I'd only glanced at the hero's stats, but I thought I remembered most being close to 600. One was above, possibly, but on average...600. I wasn't hugely confident in that assessment—or of my chances of winning—but I'd give him a tough match. That much was certain.

How much more could I level here and now? With these stats, I could take on the whole nest by myself. If my other head cooperated, it could cover my blind spots, while my ant allies could stand guard and stop any enemies that tried to flank me.

I headed for the front lines. Our side was digging up the collapsed entrance—it seemed round two of the battle would be inside the nest. As they dug, their movements became more cautious. They were clearly assuming that the enemy was digging from the opposite direction. Whoever broke through first would win the opening strike.

Considering my current speed and attack power, could I use Roll to bust in there?

*“Graar!”* The captain turned towards me.

*“Kktch?”*

I could tell by its tone of voice that it had warmed up to me.  
*Ballrabbit, translate!*

*(“Get away. For a minute. He says he. Will do.”)*

The captain looked puzzled but sent the signal along to the other ants. They scattered. I made sure they were at a safe distance, then caught Ballrabbit with my mouth. It didn't resist; it must be getting used to this, although its eyes were as dead as ever.

“Raar?” My other head looked at me, baffled.

(“Roll. Up.”) Ballrabbit told it using Telepathy. It looked nervous but obeyed.

I leapt into the air, rolled up...and zoomed. My new stats meant my speed was incredible. *Welcome to the amazing world of using Roll with an Agility stat in the 400s!* Control would be an issue, but right now I just had to move in a straight line.

I raced towards the collapsed entrance and rammed my body into the thick, packed sand. The impact was huge, sending the world dark around me in an instant. I was inside the anthill. I kept going without dropping speed.

“Kkktch!”

“Ktch!”

“Kktttchhh!”

I felt myself trample at least ten ants.

**Gained 604 Experience Points.**

**Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 604 Experience Points. Ouroboros Lv 41 has become Lv 45.**

*Fine, four ants, I guess.* I couldn’t see anything but kept going anyway. I smashed into a wall. It wasn’t a fork in the road, just the enemy’s Clay. I didn’t stop. I plowed straight into it. The tunnels buckled, and the wall collapsed. I hit another wall and forced my way through that one too. After bashing through three more walls, I slowed down and righted myself. I could keep going, but I had a hunch the nest would go down before the enemies did. *Better to fight normally now.* I spit out Ballrabbit and set it back on my head.

“Pfeff!” It used Illuminate and sent a set of glowing fireballs bursting to life.

“Kkktch!”

“Kkttchhh!”

“Ktch!”

About twenty ants stood beside the collapsed wall. I got about ten on my way down here, so thirty in total. Were there more elsewhere, or was this it?

**Gained 110 Experience Points.**

**Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 110 Experience Points.**

*Hm? What was that all about?* I glanced behind me and saw my troops were catching up, finishing off the ants I weakened with Roll. Since I had contributed to their demise, we split the experience points.

I faced off against the enemy squad. Twenty on twenty. We were evenly matched.

*“Kkkktch, kktch, kktch!”* A sudden, terrible noise echoed from deep within the tunnel. A huge ant appeared ahead of another group. More reinforcements. This place was way bigger than the other nest. This wasn’t going to be as easy as I thought.

Was the fat ant their captain? I couldn’t tell bug faces apart, but this one had an ego by my estimation. The enemy ants’ line was curved, hiding their true number. I estimated it at around another thirty.

*“Kktch!”*

*“Kkkktch!”*

My troops shot out Clay Gun. The other side responded with Clay Gun bullets of their own, but I utilized my high HP and stood as a shield. We were outnumbered, but I was a dragon with Whirlwind Slash. My troops maintained the more favorable position.

One enemy ant went down. Then another. And each time, the Divine Voice announced my experience point gain and the resulting level increase.

*“Kkkktchh!”*

The enemy ants realized their disadvantage and attempted to charge us at close range. *That’s a mistake, you guys!* When they closed in on me, they would fall victim to my allies’ Clay Gun. Another wave of reinforcement appeared from the back tunnel. *God, more? How many of these guys are there?*

*“Kktch!”* The enemy ants on the front line dashed toward me at last. A couple would be no problem, since I could knock them away with my arms. Unfortunately, there were *tons*, and they kept jumping at me, one after the other. I was stronger, but I couldn’t make up for the difference in numbers forever. My MP was low. If they got past me and set on my twenty friends, we’d be done for.

I blocked the tunnel with my bulk, choosing to focus on the enemies on my right. Despite how nervous it made me to trust it with important battle maneuvers, I let my other head deal with the ones on my left.

I didn't have to kill them all. I just had to knock them onto their backs so my buddies with the Clay Guns could kill them. The battle raged on for about ten minutes. It was tight, but my undamaged allies shored up my other head's defenses on the left. We all pulled through.

The captain was in front, fighting hard, but the enemy's skill was so high it quickly pulled its troops back.

The drawn-out battle was dealing serious damage to my concentration. Several times I missed an enemy's presence in my blind spot, which rendered me vulnerable to attack. I only made it through due to Ballrabbit's quick thinking and Telepathy. I took down one ant after another, boiling their numbers down to one.

*"Kkktch...kktch?"*

It was the fat ant. I kept expecting it to jump into the fray, but it stuck to the center of the formations throughout the battle and even retreated a few times. Up until now, my unfailing experience with the ant soldiers was a selfless willingness to sacrifice themselves for their comrades. This cautious behavior was new.

The big ant stared from side to side, stunned. *That's the captain, right?* Our captain had spent its time fighting on the front lines, but every army must be different. And every leader, for that matter. Whether plunging into battle with their soldiers, or giving orders from a safe place, both sorts of leadership could be effective...in theory, anyway.

*"Kkktcchhh!"* The fat ant swung around and fled. I leapt after it, smacking my other head against the ceiling. I didn't slow down. I skewered the ant, then slammed it into the densely packed earth.

**Gained 135 Experience Points.**

**Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 135 Experience Points.**

**Ouroboros Lv 54 has become Lv 55.**

*Barely any experience to offer. Guess it really wasn't much more than a figurehead.*

## Gained Normal Skill “Death” Lv 1.

*Okay, that is definitely a skill to avoid using.* I asked the Divine Voice for clarification, something I hadn’t done in a while.

**Normal Skill “Death.” Dark magic that steals the life force of its target. A very powerful spell with the drawback of a high failure rate. Consumes a great deal of MP. Success is dependent on the magical abilities of the user and target.**

*Wait, I thought I specialized in recovery magic? This is a death curse! And it’s another one of those useless slow-acting skills to top it all off! Wasn’t I meant to learn more recovery magic in this form?! Oh no... It was me who learned it, right?*

The thought of my other head armed with a death curse was terrifying. It’d be as much use as an NPC party member in a video game with broken AI, repeatedly casting a useless spell on a boss and draining your MP in the process.

At least all my ally ants had survived this last skirmish. One had a segment of its body riddled with clay bullets, but we provided emergency first aid with Hi-Rest. It looked a little dented even after being healed, but it could always continue its recovery with Regenerate once it regained enough MP.

Considering the huge stream of reinforcements, I was surprised the enemy ants had backed off. I couldn’t make an informed call—this was enemy territory—but it did look like a retreat. I’d gained the necessary experience. The only remaining task was to take the enemy queen’s head.

## Part 9

I WAS DEEP INSIDE the nest. The tunnel opened up into a large chamber with strangely high ceilings. Six soldier ants stood at attention; their formation centered around a significantly larger ant that was undoubtedly their queen. Queen ants had a wide range of recovery magic, but that didn't count for much with only a half dozen soldiers at her disposal. I wasn't worried.

The queen's stomach was swollen, and her mobility was low. She wasn't equipped for battle. Her role was to heal wounded soldiers.

*"Kktch!"*

*"Kkkktch!"*

*"Kktch!"*

The enemy ants lunged at me, screeching, but they didn't attack. They knew victory was impossible. I had twenty soldiers at my back. I didn't want to waste time, but I also had no desire to make the first move. I glanced back to where my captain was glaring at me, its eyes screaming, "Hurry up and do something!"

I turned back to the enemy.

*("I see. You are from. Her nest. I was planning an attack on. Her soon, but. I was too late. I thought she was of. Little importance so I. Put it off. And now I must pay. The price. I expected her to. Quietly move on. I never would have. Guessed she would ally herself with. A dragon.")*

The queen spoke via Telepathy while shaking her head.

*I think it was a spur-of-the-moment decision. It's totally possible she intended to move on before her plans changed.*

*("Tell her. She has won.")* The queen's guards all hung their heads.

*"Kkkktch."* Someone prodded me in the back. It was the captain. I gave it a questioning look while the other ants headed for the exit. *I can take care of myself, but where are you going?*

*"Kkkktch!"*

*"Kktch!"*

*"Kkkktch!"*

My ally ants started screeching. *What are they freaking out about?*

*“Kkkkkkkkttttchhhhhh!”* The six ants surrounding the queen shrieked in a simultaneous cacophony, right as the room began to violently shake. The captain streaked for the exit. *What the hell is going on?*

*“Pfeff! Pfeff!”* Ballrabbit smacked my head, and I realized what was happening. The queen meant to bring the ceiling down, and us with it. The support walls were likely made from Clay. No time to worry about experience points—it was either run or get buried alive. I hated the thought of losing the experience from the queen, but I whirled round and raced after the captain. My other head twisted its neck back. *Hey! We’re running away right now! Be obnoxious later!*

*“Raar!”* My head roared before conjuring up a black orb of light that hurtled toward the queen ant. The light wrapped itself around her neck in an expanding loop before extinguishing itself.

**Gained 688 Experience Points.**

**Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 688 Experience Points.**

**Ouroboros Lv 55 has become Lv 57.**

*Whoa. That was Death, wasn’t it? Nice job, my other head!* It must’ve worked so quickly because the queen already planned on dying.

**Title Skill “Dastardly King” Lv 6 has become Lv 7.**

*Welp, nothing I can do about that. I’m at the point where I don’t care about Title Skills at all anymore.*

I flew at low altitude to escape the room. The walls crumbled and caved in directly behind me. I worried the tunnel would collapse as well and trap me here, but thankfully I returned the way I came without incident.

I could take on the hero now, but I was still uneasy. Not just because of my stats, either—there were lots of people in Harunae. I didn’t want to drag them into the fight, and odds were high that many would take up arms when they saw a dragon. There was Adoff to worry about too: Should I leave him behind or tell him to go to safety?

*“Kktch!”*

*“Kkkktch!”*



*“Kkktcch!”*

The red ants' cries made me look up. They were carrying some strange red curved things on their backs. *Huh? What are they doing? That's not food, is it? Oh, they're cocoons!* I looked wildly around for the captain. *Hey, Ballrabbit! Ask them what they're doing!*

*“Pfeff?” (“What's. That?”)*

*“Kktch.”* The captain answered in a breezy tone.

*(“He said. They take home. And raise.”)*

*Oh. That's good. Those babies would just die if they just got left behind, right?* It made me a little uneasy, but it wasn't any of my business. Ants had their own morals and worldviews.

*(“He wants to know. If you. Help.”)*

*S-sure. I got even more experience than I'd been expecting. I don't mind helping...though I do feel like a kidnapper.*

## Part 10

I RETURNED TO THE FIRST NEST with the red ants, where they took me to a spacious room deep inside and gently laid down the enemy's cocoons. Then I opened my mouth and spat out the couple I'd carried for them.

*Ugh, that's disgusting! Peh, peh!*

All together, we brought back forty cocoons. The ants carried twenty, and my other head and I each had ten. Apparently, baby ants were raised forty at a time. If they all hatched at once, that would be way too many. When the first wave was born, the nest would swell to two hundred strong.

*Hm? What is it? Hurry up and spit out those babies, Twin Head!*

*"Raar?"* The head opened its mouth, but there was nothing inside.

*Y-you've gotta be kidding me!*

I checked out of the cocoon procession and headed straight for the queen. The sooner I spoke to her, the sooner I could leave. I took one last look down the tunnel as I went. The busy ants were craning their necks in confusion as they counted the cocoons. *Just gonna pretend I didn't see anything.*

I remembered the way to the queen's chamber, so there was no need for an escort. Wandering around on my own might seem suspicious, but I didn't have any time to waste.

Two bodyguards flanked the queen. They arched their backs when they saw me, but she motioned for them to stand down. They quickly withdrew behind her, awaiting further orders.

*("Splendid job. I heard all. About it. Only fourteen casualties. And forty. Cocoons.")*

I wiped my mind as blank as I could. It was only a matter of time before they realized what my other head had done. She gave me an odd look.

*("Are you satisfied. With your leveling?")* She sounded anxious. Resisting her Telepathy must have put her on edge.

*Please don't worry about me. I'm not going to attack your people*

again, I assured her. *I'm aware you may have led me around by the nose, but I don't care. You've all helped me reach my goal.*

*("I see. I'm very. Glad. Actually, I know of another. Nest...")*

I didn't answer.

*("...Ah. Never mind.")*

*Are you sure you're not just after more cocoons?*

I knew suddenly and without a doubt that she'd intended to use me to crush all her enemies. The other ant queen may have had a point after all.

*("Perhaps this is strange. To say to someone who. Attacked my nest. But you saved. Us. If you ever require our. Help. All you have to do is. Call. And we shall come. To your aid.")*

*I won't be in the desert much longer, but I appreciate the offer.* I actually got the impression she was trying to keep me away, like, "If you ever need anything, we'll help you, but don't darken our door again."

**Gained Title Skill "Soldier Ant" Lv MAX.**

*Huh?*

**Title Skill "Soldier Ant" Lv MAX has become "Captain Ant" Lv**

**1.**

**Title Skill "Captain Ant" Lv 1 has become Lv MAX.**

**Title Skill "Captain Ant" Lv MAX has become "Ant King" Lv**

**—.]**

*Damn, that's sure gonna get me some weird skills. I mean, I did take down an ant kingdom earlier.*

Ant society appeared to be a meritocracy, with promotions for successes. Now that I was an ant king, I could abandon my quest and live a life of luxury underground. *Hmm, that might not be so bad.*

I bade goodbye to the ant queen and headed back to the surface and the sky. I flew for some time before I caught sight of a muddy swamp in the distance: a giant slug bog. Those were usually obscured by Mirage whenever the slug inhabitants were attempting to lure in travelers with an oasis. The bog's visibility meant its slug guardian had been defeated, and I had a good guess about who had done it.

I landed to find Adoff sitting beside the bog. Did Mirage fool him? *No, not a chance.* He probably decided that resting by water—even filthy water—was better than lying in the hot sun. Besides, this was the only landmark for miles.

He stood up when he saw me. “The deadline is tomorrow. Are you ready?”

“*Raar*,” I agreed, though I hadn’t yet decided whether to bring him along or not. He couldn’t fight with that injured arm, but his testimony would be invaluable in discrediting the hero. I couldn’t pin my hopes on a damaged reputation taking him down, but it was worth a shot even if the hero had already sewn some distrust in Adoff throughout the city.

If worst came to worst, we’d fight. If I wanted to guarantee that Adoff wouldn’t die a needless death, I should go to Harunae alone. I should face the hero and rescue Nina and Adoff’s family without any backup at all.

“Don’t worry.” Adoff must have seen my conflicted expression. “I’ll expose him for who he really is. I’m fully confident the citizens will heed me.” There was no doubt in his eyes.

“*Raaar...*” I nodded, but my stomach was still in knots. Hoping the church would disavow the hero just didn’t seem realistic. And even if we did manage it, we were still faced with finding Nina—a slave—and Adoff’s family—wanted fugitives—someplace to live.

## Part 11

I FLEW LOW TO THE SAND as I headed for Harunae. Ballrabbat sat atop my head, while Adoff and two red ants rode on my back; I'd decided to take the ant queen up on her offer. It was late at night, and the desert landscape was dark. We needed to reach Harunae by tomorrow at high noon. I kept a low altitude, not wanting to be seen from the city walls.

Adoff asked me yesterday, "Could you turn into a human? To sneak into Harunae?" After a bit of hesitation, I agreed to take the risk. A dragon entering Harunae would cause untold chaos, and then it'd be impossible to reach the prisoners. It would also cut off Adoff's chance at exposing the hero. Human Transformation would decimate my MP, but that was a sacrifice I'd have to make.

Adoff assured me that if his plan worked, we might not even have to fight. I'd risked my life leveling, so I wanted to fight at least a *little*... but it was always better to take the pacifist route. I would fly us close to Harunae, then use Human Transformation. My automatic recovery skills would allow me to remain in human form nearly an hour. Transformed, I'd ride into the city on a giant ant. The queen had bequeathed me with her fastest soldiers.

The idea of facing the hero at less than full MP bothered me, but at least Human Transformation was my only skill that burned through a bunch of it at once. I ran out of MP during my fight with the ants, but I was a much lower level back then and now I had Automatic MP Recovery. Besides, if I couldn't win this fight after using 1000 MP, I had bigger problems.

Midnight was behind us. Soon the sun would rise. I had to reach the center of town by noon.

"Hey, is that...?" Adoff was muttering to himself. Following his gaze, I saw a man clinging to a horse, sobbing. He had a turban wrapped around his head and a thick cloak. I'd seen a similar sight somewhere before. *Wait, isn't that the Harunae soldier I fought? What was his name? Hagen!*

I'd witnessed Hagen's beloved horse abandon him, and the last time I saw him he'd been riding a camel. Steed and master had reunited

after all this time. He hadn't noticed us yet.

Adoff's eyes widened in shock. "What is he doing here?"

He must know Hagen. It made sense, since they were both Harunae soldiers.

"Follow him! Please!" Adoff begged, pointing. He seemed adamant. Were they close friends? "Illusia told me that all the soldiers died. He said you killed them! I assumed that meant Illusia got rid of them all himself, but Hagen must have escaped."

*Wait, for real?*

"Hagen's survival is further evidence of Illusia's lies! He won't be prepared to explain it away, it'll cast doubt on everything he says! Not even the church can protect him then!"

*God, really? A guy like Hagen is that valuable? Good thing we happened to run into him, then. I would have left him to his business under any other circumstances. Adoff should have said something earlier! I would have looked for him. Oh wait, yeah—Adoff thought Hagen was dead.*

I understood his logic better as I mused on the situation. Adoff was an escaped prisoner, and his word wouldn't carry much weight. A second witness could be our ace in the hole.

"It's unlike Illusia to make such an obvious mistake," Adoff muttered. "Imagine letting Hagen live. Still, we may as well make the most of the opportunity!"

I wondered about that myself. If a witness could be so damaging, why would the hero let him go? From what Adoff told me, the guy didn't seem the kind to balk at killing someone to keep them quiet.

This might be a trap, but I didn't have the information to make that judgment. Anything was possible; I knew that better than anyone. I'd defer to Adoff here; if he was prepared to trust Hagen, so would I.

I immediately changed directions, making for the horse and rider. I drew close just in time to watch the horse founder and collapse into the sand. It was heavily wounded, with a deep gouge at the base of its back leg, bleeding freely. A monster must've attacked it. Hagen was crouched down beside his horse with his hands hovering over its wound. He was sobbing.

"Maria! Maria! Please!" I wondered who in the world he was

talking to before I realized it was the horse's name. *That's the same horse who abandoned him, right?* Hagen wasn't holding a grudge, which was surprisingly heroic of him. Maria the horse gazed at him with love in her eyes.

"Rest! Rest! Ahh, damn it!" The light sprouting from Hagen's hands eased the horse's wound but didn't draw it closed.

I got as close to Hagen as much as safety would allow and said, "*Graar!*"

"Gyaaaaaaaah!" Hagen screamed and leapt to his feet. He broke into a flat run, abandoning his horse altogether.





Poor Maria stared at Hagen's back, positively aghast.

*You two deserve each other, you know that?*

Hagen tripped over his own legs and fell to the sand. Panting, he scrambled backwards, staring up at me. "W-wait...why is...Adoff—*Sir* Adoff here...? Riding on a two-headed dragon?!"

*Is it just me or did he hesitate to call Adoff "Sir" at first?* Well, to be fair, the hierarchy was a little ambiguous at present.

"No need for formalities," Adoff said, like he'd read my mind. "I'm not the Knight Commander anymore. I'm a simple runaway prisoner."

Hagen swore. He stood up and unsheathed his dagger, pointing it at us with trembling hands.

"Put down your weapon, Hagen. I'm not going to fight you. Do you know what happened to the men who accompanied you to slay the dragon?"

"They abandoned me and ran back ho—"

"Illusia said the dragon killed them."

Hagen blinked. "Wh-what?! That's not what happened!"

"He said you were the one who told him that," Adoff ploughed on, undeterred. "You didn't see him?"

"If I'd seen him, would I be wandering around in the desert like this?! Stop spouting nonsense and explain!"

"Fine, fine." Adoff drew in a breath. "Everyone in town thinks you're dead, and why wouldn't you be? You were left to the whims of a wicked dragon. The dragon must have let you go..." That last question was directed at me. I nodded. "So Illusia assumed you were dead, and since you lead the troop, he used your name. Bad luck."

"What in the world are you talking about?!"

"Illusia framed me. He killed the entirety of your troop to give himself an excuse to get me out of prison."

"B-but why would Master Illusia do that?! He would never..."

"What reason do I have to lie about this? Come with me. I need your testimony."

Hagen didn't believe us right away, but his expression steadied as Adoff explained the situation. Apparently, Adoff's murder accusation

had never rested well with him.

“That two headed dragon is an evolved form of the wicked dragon? You *did* let me go.” Hagen looked at me. “All right. I’ll help you. If I don’t, Illusia will surely kill me to keep me quiet.”

After he relented, I had my other head use Hi-Rest on Maria’s leg, healing it completely. Maria stood up, looking at Hagen like he was trash under her hooves. I remembered hearing in my old world that once you lost an animal’s trust, regaining it was nearly impossible.

*Don’t forget that you were the one who ran out on him first, Maria!*

Hagen mounted and followed behind me, Ballrabbit, Adoff, and the two red ants. We had formed a regular parade toward Harunae.

“Dragon—do you want to wait outside town? Hagen’s testimony should eliminate the need for any fighting, and I can defend myself against guards. I give you my word that I will save that catgirl and clear her name.”

I shook my head. If I was discovered lurking outside the city walls, everything would be for naught. Despite Adoff’s reassurances, I doubted we could tie this up with a nice, neat discussion. I couldn’t keep myself that far away from the action.

Adoff shrugged. “If you’re sure.”

It took a few more hours of low-altitude flying to reach Harunae. From a distance, I spotted that familiar circle of stones. *Wow. Memories.* It was a magical circle, meant to repel monsters. Being near it was a little uncomfortable, but nothing more than that.

That was the last thought I had before Ballrabbit rolled off my head. I caught it, landing quickly.

“Pfeff...” (*“Don’t. Like that.”*)

*Oh, I guess it works after all. It’s never given me much trouble, but then again I don’t really have the mind of a monster.*

“Kktchh.”

“Kkttchh.”

The ants didn’t seem too crazy about it either.

*Should we go around?*

*(“It’s not. That bad.”)*

*Okay. Sorry, just take it a step at a time.*

The stones slowly disappeared from view, and before us lay Harunae. I crouched to let Adoff and the others off my back. This was as far as I could go as a dragon. As soon as everyone was on the ground, I used Human Transformation. I was at level 7, so *surely* there would be some improvement this time.

Heat surged through my body, and I felt myself shrinking.

*“Graar? Raar?!”* My other head twisted its neck, flipping out. It couldn’t tell what was going on. *I should’ve had Ballrabbit explain first.* I had a sudden, horrifying thought. I grabbed my other head at lightspeed and jammed it against my shoulder, forcing our necks together.

*“Raaar!” Forgive me, Twin Head. But I absolutely can’t be running around as a two-headed human.*

My other head softened under my hands. It shrank smaller and smaller along with the rest of me, and by the time I’d reached human size, it had disappeared entirely. Early transformations had left me at least six feet tall, but now I was shorter than Adoff. Maybe around five feet, eight inches? I touched my head. *I have hair!* I pulled some down to eye level to get a look at it. White, and long enough to touch my shoulders. That must be from the Ouroboros’s mane.

I looked down at my body. I was still heavily muscled, but not grotesquely so like before. I had scales here and there, but most of me was covered in bluish-grey skin. My nails looked way less clawlike too. I was clearly not an ordinary human, but I could pass for a demi-human. Of course I had no way to know what my face looked like, the most important part. I patted my head and felt horns. *Oh well, can’t do anything about that.*

*“Hagen. Give him your cloak. I’ll hide my face as well.”*

Hagen tossed me his heavy riding cloak. It was folded in the middle and long enough to reach my feet. Adoff removed his own cloak and wrapped it around himself like a robe, so I imitated him, hiding my face and body.

*“Kktchh!”* The ants ran over to us. I picked up Ballrabbit and set it on one ant’s back, then mounted the second myself. Adoff climbed up to join Ballrabbit, while Hagen rode Maria. She didn’t seem pleased with this arrangement. *Maybe Hagen and Adoff should switch places.*

*(“Think she’s just. Pouting.”)*

*I hope so, but I wouldn’t bet his life on it.*

## Interlude: The Hero's Epic Tale Act 4

### Part 1

**“T**HE DAY IS FINALLY HERE, Bishop. As much as it pains me for an innocent person to lose their life, that’s the law. What can we do but pray for the salvation of their souls?”

The bishop gave me a very unpleasant look.

*Oh, something wrong?* Today every family member within two degrees of kinship to the runaway prisoner Adoff would be put to death in his place. This would serve the church well, in its way, as I’d spent valuable time spreading rumors of the family’s involvement in collusion against the church. One less thing for the bishop to worry about.

“Are you not aware of Ardesia’s continued pressure on us to release the demi-human slaves?” the bishop snapped. “A public execution at a time like this is a diplomatic catastrophe! What in the world were you thinking?!”

*He’s still hung up about that? Sigh.*

“Stop worrying. Who cares what Ardesia thinks? They can’t lay a finger on Harunae as long as I’m around. Wouldn’t setting the precedent of letting criminals go be worse? We must send a message of strength, Bishop.”

The Felis-human girl was to be executed alongside Adoff’s family today. I’d come across her on my journey back from the dragon hunt; she was collapsed in the desert, so I took her into my care. Upon realizing that she’d be put back in the slave pen, however, she colluded with Adoff. The two of them betrayed me, even after I saved their lives, by attempting to weaken me with poison. I fought Adoff off while barely conscious, before fatally wounding him.

He ran off somewhere to die, leaving me so heavily injured I was forced to abandon my hunt for the dragon. I brought the captive demi-human home with me and, in my kind and generous way, pleaded with the church to release her. Alas, the consequences of turning against the

hero were severe. The church denied my request and sentenced her to death. The bishop convinced me it was for the safety of Harunae, and I tearfully agreed.

All nonsense, of course, but who cared about that? The truth didn't matter; what mattered was the story. This one had a few holes, but nothing I couldn't paper over. I was a righteous, strong, and kind hero. Who would doubt me?

I walked past the bishop and over to a small window overlooking the city. People were already gathering at the site of the execution. "Time to go."

The bishop frowned, filled with spite. He hated the situation at hand, stuffy, selfish old fool that he was. I wished him a lifetime of bowing and scraping to his betters. He was certainly never getting another word of kindness from me.

If such a tiny complication had him in such conniptions, there was no telling what he might do if the Plague Dragon actually showed up today.

Publicly, I could not refuse a direct order from the church. If, for instance, a Plague Dragon appeared and wreaked havoc, that would be the church's failure for not utilizing me as well as they could. I couldn't wait to see his face when he had a whole dragon to deal with. He'd go as white as a ghost, as would all those worthless knights riding my coattails.

After the dragon killed a few people, I'd do my duty and slay it. A B-rank monster was hardly worth the trouble, but I'd draw out the battle for the drama of it all. I was hardly risking my life. *That damn thing better show up.*

It bothered me even now that the dragon had Divine Voice and View Status. It...no, *he* might realize he stood no chance against me and get cold feet. Leave me at the altar, as it were. A very possible outcome, indeed.

But I remembered how he'd risked his life to protect the slave girl. Maaaybe that had been pure instinct. Maybe with time to think, he would have played it safer.

If the dragon didn't show up—well, I'd worry about that when it happened. Maybe I could taunt him with the bodies, lure him in. My one worry was the possibility he had evolved into a rank A dragon, but

he'd been a significant distance from his maximum level when we met. Leveling up that much in a week would be basically impossible. That sort of sustained experience gain was both difficult and unlikely.

I'd once tried a similar tactic to power level that culminated in the needless deaths of several comrades. I was green back then. I made mistakes.

"If you're planning to try something underhanded, know that we have a plan for that," the bishop told me. "The church won't cover for you forever."

*Puh-lease! Threaten me with something believable, won't you?*

Without the hero to lend legitimacy, the church of Harunae would be completely worthless. It needed me.

"That's not very nice, Bishop. This is happening because you refused to brand Sir Adoff. Ahh, if only Sir Adoff had his Prisoner's Mark properly administered, he never would have dared escape. I'm distraught over it... You see, when you think about it, I'm the one covering for *you*."

The bishop spluttered. "That's absolutely untrue! He had the brand, I checked it myself!"

"Keep your voice down. You wouldn't want someone to overhear, would you?"

The church indeed *did* brand Adoff on his back with the Prisoner's Mark and therefore granted me the power to keep his behavior in check. That conflicted with my story of him turning on me, though, so I'd had to edit it out and blame the church for negligence in the process.

"Who will you make into your scapegoat? Have you decided yet? You know," I mused. "Thinking about it, someone might conclude that you did it on purpose...to allow Adoff the chance to kill me."

The bishop's face twisted further into apoplectic rage.

He knew the pool of people capable of administering a Mark was small. He couldn't foist responsibility off onto a worthless underling. I wondered, sincerely, who he would cast into the pit this time.

## Part 2

TEN POSTS LINED the execution ground. The slave girl was chained to one, and nine of Adoff's relatives were shackled to the rest. Their mouths were gagged with cloth, but their eyes spoke well enough; filled with hopeless pain. I saw their faces clearly from my vantage point on the knights' platform. A perfect view, and worth every penny of the bribe I paid the guards. Only church officials were usually permitted this close.

Initially, some of Adoff's relatives were furious with him, but their anger died down after a few days. Now they all looked pale and scared. A pity that they were gagged; I wanted to hear them pleading for their lives, cursing their fates. Then again, it was safer for me that they couldn't speak. I wouldn't want them to say something that might cause me trouble...and anyway, it wasn't like anyone was coming to save them.

Their executioner was chosen from among the knights. He would run them through with a sword, post and all. Simple, but far more painful than other methods. Why shouldn't it be? This public ordeal served as a deterrent above all else.

I looked at the noonday sun, high up in the sky. No dragon. *I shouldn't be surprised. Why would a dragon risk its life for a little girl?* My easy victory over Adoff had left me overconfident, I supposed. It was a foolish move to expect the Plague Dragon to show up.

Well, no matter. I could easily dream up another method of luring monsters into Harunae to lay waste to it. Summoning was out of the question, since it could be easily traced. *Hmm, what to do, what to do?*

The executioner strode onto the field. He turned to face the citizens and raised his sword up to the sky. "These ten have committed crimes against the people of Harunae! May death cleanse their filthy souls!"

I covered my mouth to stifle a yawn. I couldn't let people know how bored I was at this somber occasion. I heard a distant thump, like a body hitting the ground. Confused cries arose from the assembled citizens. My hand fell from my mouth and I looked around, unable to identify the source of the sound. Metal swords clanged against each



other nearby. I continued to scan the crowd and finally saw him: a man in a long cloak, hood obscuring his face.

An ambush. One knight had already been felled, now crawling weakly on the ground. Our intruder was no pushover, and he'd known to attack when my guard was down.

"Why do you have a knight's sword?! You bastard!" A second knight charged the intruder, who was indeed wielding a broadsword stamped with a familiar crest. I knew that sword. Someone must have swiped it off Adoff's body in the desert.

The man threw off his cloak and tossed it at me. I drew my sword and slashed it through, cleanly bisecting it into two swaths of fabric billowing in the wind. I knew the man would come for me next—he'd created a blind spot to hide in, using the cloak to obscure his approach. A neat trick, but not neat enough. Not against me.

I dropped into a fighter's stance. I had plenty of time to ready myself while he crossed the distance. I planned to run him through the shoulder and let the knights deal with him.

The ripped cloak drifted breezily to the ground, at last revealing the assailant's face. I froze.

"Adoff?! No, you're dead!" He couldn't have survived, there was no way! Adoff anticipated my moment of shock and exploited it, changing the trajectory of his sword before he thrust it at my face.

A diversionary tactic. Waiting until the last moment to reveal his face meant robbing me of any time to counter him, and now he was too close. He wouldn't kill me, but I wasn't prepared to swallow the humiliation of this lowlife landing a hit on me in public. *What if he cut up my face?*

If this really *was* Adoff, I could stop him with the Prisoner's Mark. I leapt backwards, screaming, "Grovel!" His strength melted into nothing, causing his sword to drop from his hand. He hit the ground shoulder-first, blade clattering down beside him.

The knights rushed over. "Are you all right, Master Illusia?!"

"Aha...yes, I'm fine. But...seize him!"

"Why did he just...fall? What happened?"

As several soldiers emerged from the crowd, I realized my mistake. Chances were that one of these men had branded Adoff with

the Prisoner's Mark. My story wouldn't fool him; surely he'd whined constantly to whoever would listen that I was telling a lie. He might have even been waiting for Adoff to show this whole time!

"You said my Mark didn't work and blamed it on the ineptitude of the church? I figured it would be something like that," Adoff declared, two knights holding him back.

So his plan all along was to con me into using the Mark. I'd blundered into it like a fool. I clenched my fists.

*Calm down. Making a public scene won't do any good. They'll execute him and be done with it.*

The soldiers were watching me with suspicion. I'd repeatedly insisted Adoff attacked me because he wasn't branded, and here I was, making use of his brand as soon as he turned his sword on me. Their concerns were understandable. One of the soldiers came forward.

"Master Illusia? Forgive me for my rudeness, but I need to ask a few questions."

I heaved a sigh. "Your questions can wait until later. Return Adoff to the dungeon and resume the executions!"

"B-but, sir...if Adoff has returned, he can stand trial in place of his relatives. They were only on the block to take the punishment of an escaped criminal." The soldier shook his head. "This case is full of irregularities! A reopening of the investigation might be warranted."

"A reinvestigation?! Imbecile! Get back to your position!" I needed to buy time, enough to think my way out of this. There had to be a way to explain the presence of the Prisoner's Mark.

I threw a glance toward the bishop. "Everything is fine here, Your Grace! Problem solved, carry on!"

The bishop gave the order. "Bring the intruder to the dungeons!" The soldiers obeyed him, falling back in line, but the nearby citizens were rapidly joining in their suspicion.

To hell with Adoff! I hadn't thought he'd survive in a million years. That was my mistake for using a curse to take him out, rather than felling him in a clean stroke. This chump insisted on making life difficult for me to the very end, but I would triumph regardless. I could take care of this. He had no proof except for his own skin. The number one priority right now was to ensure that the bishop had him killed.

“Master Illusia. I have a question for you too.” Another man moved through the crowd. The citizens were abuzz at the sight of him.

“H-Hagen?! Why...why...why are you...?!”

“You told everyone I died. My comrades fled. I want you to tell me where they ended up.”

*Dammit.* I should have factored this in as a possibility. That dragon made friends with a demi-human—it wouldn’t have killed Hagen. I’d been misled back when I first heard the news.

“That idiot... He said you were—!” I swiftly covered my mouth with my hand, but I wasn’t quite swift enough. A knight rushed forward.

“Master Illusia? Please explain what’s going on!”

The soldiers once again broke ranks and approached me. “Agreed. We should clear up this misunderstanding here and now, especially considering citizens are watching.”

What an irritating rabble! Why were they standing up to me now of all times? This was unbelievable. How could Adoff *and* Hagen both still be alive? Adoff I could handle—he was a criminal with his reputation in tatters. Hagen, though...he meant trouble. They must have met in the desert and joined forces, which meant Hagen knew everything I’d done to Adoff.

I needed to get him out of view, but how? This could not turn into a public spectacle. *Why is nothing going my way?!*

“Start the executions! You dare to disobey the bishop? You’re not the only ones who want answers about Hagen! We must take our time in our investigations. He won’t run, not if he is a true soldier of Harunae. If he does, he must be a monster in disguise! Toss him in the dungeon as well, just to be safe!”

I couldn’t afford any more bluster in front of the public; it would be better to take Hagen captive and buy time to come up with a plan. The bishop would take care of him for me. I’d only be forced to admit to a small lie.

They’d want to know *why* I lied, though. I needed time to formulate a coherent excuse. I’d lose the trust of some citizens, but that couldn’t be helped. Sacrifices must be made.

“Hurry it up!” The knights didn’t move, just traded bewildered

glances. "Don't stand idly by! Do your jobs!" I could fix this, if they would only get Hagen out of here! I threw a furious look at the bishop. The color drained from his face.

"Did you think I'd protect you forever?" The bishop's voice was eloquent with disgust. "Did you honestly think there wouldn't be a breaking point?"

I flushed with color. The knights weren't moving. The soldiers murmured suspiciously. The other church officials, who just followed the bishop blindly, sat as still as statues.

"Gaah!" I spun to find every eye on me. No matter where I looked in the crowd, they were watching. My head was pounding. I couldn't think.

*Whatever. Who cares?* They'd need time to assemble a case against me, and by then I'd be out of Harunae, never to return.

"Out of my way!" I pushed through the soldiers. "Move, I said! You make me sick! Why are you staring at me?!" I elbowed through a group of knights. "Out of my way, do you hear me? Move!"

Hagen chased me down and grabbed my shoulder. "Don't think you can run a—"

"Get your *filthy hands off of me!*" I shoved him into the dirt. His head struck the ground and he rolled along it, sand billowing around him. The men surrounding me backed away, fearing violence.

*Damn it!* What were Hagen and Adoff doing here together? Was the dragon here too? Had the two of them made a deal with a monster? It was possible...even likely. The dragon had the Human Transformation skill. He could be here right now, blending in with the crowd.

I scanned my surroundings for any suspicious figures. At once I spotted a man with bluish-white skin, his form concealed by way of a Harunae soldier's cloak. Everyone around him looked confused and frightened, but he stared straight at me with an intent gaze. That was him. It had to be.

Laughter welled up in my chest. Yes, finally something I could fight! What luck that this dragon was an idiot. If he revealed his true form, that would be all the distraction I needed.

The dragon must have shown up to save the slave girl. I could kill

her and trigger his rage, which would force him back into his dragon form. I pelted up the platform, drawing my sword as I ran. Kicking aside the executioner, I swung my blade for the slave girl's neck—the man in the crowd bolted toward me. Laughter tore out of me in peals. *God really does love me!*

I pulled my strike just as the man's body began expanding.

*"Graaaaaar!"*

Once the Plague Dragon drew the entire square's attention, I'd slip away and kill Adoff and Hagen. I could still salvage this situation. This misunderstanding was nothing compared to a dragon attack.

The dragon's giant head bared a pair of gleaming fangs at me. I had to hold myself back from killing him instantly, since I needed him to trash the place. I'd rile him up a little first, no more. "You really came! Stupid creature—hmm?"

I leapt at the dragon and slashed at his mouth. He caught the blade in his jaws. Was I imagining it, or was the dragon more powerful than before? As I tried to yank my blade away, I noticed something: The dragon's face was blue.

*This isn't a Plague Dragon.*

"Raaaaaar!" The dragon roared, right as his second head lunged at me. I let go of the sword, but I was too late. I had no choice but to retreat.

"Oof!" The world spun, and my consciousness flickered. A huge impact at my back rocked me forward. I realized a few moments later that I'd been slammed into the ground. Screams burst forth from the crowd.

"Hi-Rest."

A light surrounded me that eased my pain. I looked up and saw two dragons...no, a two-headed dragon.

"Wh-who are you?"

The two heads roared.



## Chapter 6: Day of Judgement

### Part 1

**“H**URRY IT UP! Don’t stand idly by! Do your jobs!”

The hero was screaming, barking out orders to the gathered soldiers. No one listened. Blue veins bulged on his forehead as he stared around frantically. Things were going according to plan, so perfectly that it was almost ridiculous. Adoff made a dramatic entrance and exposed the hero’s lies, before Hagen showed up to shore up his story. The hero’s reputation was crumbling before my eyes; it was clear from how not a single person moved to obey his stream of commands.

He appeared to be at the end of his rope. I searched the square and found Nina, chained up to an execution post

on the platform. She looked baffled by the current scene, but hope flickered in her eyes.

This was it. Now that the hero had lost his authority, Nina and Adoff’s family would be freed...but then, I caught the hero looking at me. The desperation in his eyes twisted into a smile.

*Does he recognize me? What can he even do at this point?*

He raced up to the platform, knocking the executioner aside, eyes intent on Nina. She struggled as she watched him approach. Fear swooped through me, and I pushed through the crowd toward them.

The hero drew his sword. He was going to kill Nina, here, in front of all these people. I leapt into the air in the same instant that the hero turned his sword to me.

“Graaaaar!” I canceled Human Transformation in midair, feeling my body expand back to my original size in seconds. Screams came from all directions as the crowd panicked. People would be injured in the commotion, and it was Ballrabbit’s job to heal them. According to Adoff, Ballrabbits were smart, non-violent, and so cute that many people kept them as pets...even though they ate way too much. Humans

wouldn't be afraid of a little ballrabbit.

"You really came! Stupid creature—hmm?"

When the hero swung his sword at me, I simply caught it with my teeth. He tried to yank it free, but I didn't let go. *You take care of the rest, Twin Head.*

"Raaaaar!" My other head lunged at the vulnerable hero. He let go of his sword and jumped backwards, kicking at my other head, intending to use the recoil to boost him to safety. He made contact, and for a second I thought he'd pulled it off. Then I watched as he was slammed hard to the ground.

He was no match for us. All that leveling up had been worth it. I'd checked the hero's status earlier from within the crowd to make sure: I had him beat in every stat.

That didn't make the hero's physical abilities any less strong. He'd lost one sword, but two others remained, and he wouldn't yield easily. I twisted my neck and spat out the sword, which sent the blade sinking deeply into the ground. I didn't want to start a brawl, but he was trying to murder Nina! I couldn't sit by and watch...and since I'd come this far, I might as well teach him a lesson.

"Wh-who are you?" The hero stood up and drew the second blade, the same one he'd used on me when we met. This must be his serious sword.

"Raaaaaar!"

"Graaar!"

My heads roared as one and charged the hero.

"Quick!" A ball of light enveloped the hero; he had cast a spell to boost his speed. "I refuse to believe that *another* dragon shares my name. You must have evolved. You caught me off guard, I admit...and bringing material witnesses along too? Nicely played." The hero brandished his sword. "But all my problems are solved once I kill you. Ha ha! Real proof that I was born lucky! Your impeccable timing is only outdone by your naiveté!"

He was right. When I appeared, I distracted the crowd from fully carrying out their denunciation of the hero. I may even have destroyed all the hard work we'd poured into our plan.

Too bad. I refused to just stand there and let Nina die. I felt for



Adoff and Hagen, but Nina was why I was here. She was my priority.

The hero couldn't be allowed to run rampant across the world. If he was expelled from Harunae, he'd just run off to some other town and menace them in the same way. I wasn't going to let him get away with it. I'd get revenge for Adoff and his family. I was going to kill the hero, here and now.

"*Raaaaar!*" I lashed out, aiming for the hero's sword. He smacked my claw with the flat of the blade and narrowly managed to angle himself out of my path. I opened my mouth wide.

"Lucent Luna!" Countless orbs of light burst from the hero's sword and flew toward my face. Too fast for me to dodge, they slammed into my forehead, mouth, cheeks, and neck. Everywhere they touched burned in searing agony. That did more damage than I'd expected.

"Ha ha! How's that? This sword was forged to attack wicked dragons like you!" The hero moved into a follow-up. *Now.* I gathered up all my stamina.

"*Grraaaaaar!*"

My fangs sank into the flesh of his shoulder. His blood overflowed from my mouth as I lifted him off his feet, then twisted to slam both of us into the ground. The earth split, sending dust and sand swirling.

"Damn you."

I twisted again, repeating the move in the other direction.

"*Raar!*" It hurt me, but it hurt the hero more. My HP could take the hit. I was poised for a third body slam, when one of my fangs snapped off and went flying. The hero wriggled out of my grasp. He staggered, but he landed on his feet.

"Rest!"

"Rest!"

The surrounding knights chanted spells.

"A-are you all right, M-Master Illusia?" The knights were at an impasse. They didn't trust the hero, but they

weren't eager to side with a dragon over him, either. Their priority must be to get rid of me first, and I was sure that the hero shared that goal—if he defeated me, he'd be better placed to sidestep guilt.

I agreed with him for once. This fight was between me and him. If regular humans attacked me, I'd knock them gently aside, like I'd done with Hagen.

"Thank you, dear colleagues!" the hero vamped, swooning dramatically. "You saved me!" He threw me a smirk that told me he planned to use the knights as human shields. Getting an attack in would be impossible with them in the way. The hero had clocked me perfectly. He knew I wouldn't kill innocents.

## Part 2

**“H**I-REST! PHYSICAL BARRIER!” The hero gestured with his free hand and shouted. His form blurred briefly and the bleeding from his shoulder slowed.

*Illusia*

*Species: Earth-human*

*Status: Quick, Physical Resistance Boost*

*Lv: 78/100*

*HP: 578/602*

*MP: 441/552*

His high MP was a problem, but not a pressing one. Mine was higher, and I had automatic recovery skills that he lacked. The longer the battle went on, the more stamina he'd lose.

I leapt up into low-altitude flight, hoping to come at the hero from the air.

“Sorry, boys,” the hero said, as he slipped behind the front line. “But it's your turn.”

The knights all mumbled out their usual, “M-Master Illusia?!” They turned their blades on me, nonetheless. The so-called hero's inflated ego only persisted so long as he was tormenting something weaker than himself. As soon as I put up some real resistance, he was happy to cower behind his men. That made it twice as difficult for me to avoid casualties.

“Illusion!” The hero's sword split in two. “Slash!” Three bolts of energy burst from his sword tip, deftly avoiding the line of knights, tearing up the earth toward me.

*Calm down. You have Illusion Resistance. You'll be able to tell the real one right away.* I focused on the three slashes wavering in my vision until they blurred and become one—there, the one on the left. I dodged, then rushed the hero from the air.

“Waaah!”

The knights held fast. I kicked against the wall of shields, denting one and knocking its owner backwards. I held back another knight with my other leg as I gnashed my teeth at the hero.

“Raaar!” My other head started jerking itself around. It knocked me off balance, which ruined my aim. Instead of getting my fangs in the hero, I smacked him with my snout. Better than nothing, but a worthless hit. I landed to regroup.

*Of course.* I should have taken the time to explain the plan in more detail to my other head. *This guy goes absolutely bananas at exactly the worst moment!*

The hero’s outline turned fuzzy and strange, and a moment later he transformed into a common knight, stumbling to the ground.

“Aaargh.”

He’d made a rank-and-file soldier look like him with Illusion, and only used that Slash attack as a ploy for attention. That must be why my other head pulled us back. I was suddenly grateful to have an additional brain. *Sorry I doubted you. Nice job!*

That meant the hero was somewhere close, ready to attack when I was off guard. He’d aim for my neck. Instinctively, I dodged. The hero’s sword slashed at my face.

“Graaaaaar!” *Damn it, he got me in the eye!* That was better than my neck but not great! *Can I use Regenerate to grow a new eye?*

“Damn it! You’ve got good instincts!” The hero sprang onto a knight’s back, then used the kickback to flip off of him and out of my reach. The knight he’d treated like a springboard crumpled to his knees.

“Gaaah?!”

At least I’d herded the hero away from the rest of them. True, I rendered several of them unable to fight in the process, but we were in human territory. Reinforcements could show up at any moment. Whatever I did, it had to be fast.

“S-someone—someone heal me!” The knight I’d mistaken for the hero struck his head pretty hard when he fell, and he was bleeding heavily. I tried to go easy on the knights, but I didn’t hold back in his case, what with the Illusion spell convincing me that he was the hero and all. Only my other head’s interference had saved his life. Well,

saved his life for the time being. “Someone...”

His fellow knights threw him concerned glances, but none moved to help. They were too afraid of drawing my attention.

The hero had no intention of helping him either, but that went without saying. I glanced at my other head. “*Raar!*” A gentle light enveloped the fallen knight.

“O-ohh! I’m...saved?” The knight stood up, palm pressed to his forehead. He stared at my other head, completely stunned. The other knights looked equally stricken.

**Title Skill “Itty-Bitty Hero” Lv 6 has become Lv 7.**

*No time to think about Title Skills right now!*

Slowly, a single knight lowered his sword. One by one, the others followed suit.

“What’s wrong with all of you? Distract the dragon!”

The hero didn’t understand what was happening. The knights weren’t fighting to help him. They were fighting to protect their country, and once they realized I was only focused on a single man, that I was even prepared to *help* everyone else, they no longer had any reason to stand against me. They’d seen the way the hero hid behind them despite his superior strength. They were common soldiers, but they weren’t stupid.

“W-we have to fight!” one of them yelled, but even he was shaking with hesitation. “It’s our job to defend this country from threats!”

“That’s right! Hurry up!” the hero screeched. Veins stood out on his forehead. “What was the point of all your training?! Useless curs. Why should you be elevated over ordinary citizens?! You’re supposed to put your life on the line for this country, yet you give up for no reason?! I risk my life fighting monsters every day while all you do is patrol the city! Hurry up and *move!*”

But no one did. Even the hesitant knight laid down his sword.

A man who cowered behind weaker men did not have a leg to stand on. I’d bet the knights were thinking, *is this guy for real?*

“You pieces of trash! You’re the lowest of the low! You can’t even imagine what I’m going to do to all of you when this is over!”

I reared onto my hind legs and shot a Whirlwind Slash towards the hero. Blades of wind sliced after him as he ranted.

“Slash!” The hero’s attack swallowed up my wind blades and buffeted them back to me. I swung in a wide circle to avoid them.

The hero changed tactics. “Summon!”

A familiar winged horse appeared. After the hero climbed onto its back, the Pegasus leapt into the air with its nose tipped up toward the sky. The hero’s voice carried back to me on the wind, “Follow me if you dare! I’m the one you want, right?”

I’d been avoiding flying because of the Dragon Scale Powder, but it didn’t act fast enough to be truly dangerous. Nina’s symptoms took a long time to emerge, and Adoff was still fine. *Just gotta keep this battle short.*

I spread my wings and streaked after my enemy.

## Part 3

**T**HE HERO FLEW higher and higher. How far was he planning to go? Below us, Harunae shrank into a tiny toy city. I used Regenerate as I flew, gradually healing my wounded eye. I could see out of it again. *That's one amazing skill.* Rest couldn't have done that.

Once I was back in fighting form, I concentrated on closing the gap between myself and the hero.

"Quick! Power! Quick!" Light subsumed the hero and the Pegasus. The horse's speed picked up and the distance between us widened again. Riding made it easier for him to focus on magic while he fled. How far did he intend to run? There were no hiding places up here; exhausting himself would only give me an advantage, since I had so many auto-recovery skills.

"Illusion!" The hero's body split into three. "Lucent Luna!" He raised his sword towards the sky. Usually that skill produced ten spheres of light. With Illusion it was thirty. His boosted speed made it difficult to tell the real from fake.

These were the absolute worst skills he could have used right then, from my perspective.

I dropped speed abruptly and flew to his other side. *I'll have to dodge them all, even the fake ones.*

When I looked up, the hero was right in my face.

"*Graaaaar!*" I kicked him and felt nothing. Another illusion. *Damn it.* I lost him. I couldn't correct course now—he'd target me. Descending was faster than ascending, so that was what I did. Flying this high was difficult now that I was so large. I searched the sky for the hero as I fell.

Pain jolted through my back. The hero was falling parallel to me. I swung my tail into my blind spot, but he dodged. He was used to fighting in midair.

He flew around me easily, prodding me with his sword wherever he had the chance.

With its speed boosted, the Pegasus was absurdly fast. I couldn't get any hits on either of them; meanwhile, he used the disorientation of

Illusion to break through my guard.

“Raaaaaar!” I exhaled Scorching Breath, trying to catch him in the area of effect. He appeared before me and charged, his sword chopping up and down until it caught me in my chin.

“Gaar!” My head snapped back, leaving me vulnerable.

The hero didn’t have Fire Resistance, but he did have Spirit’s Protection and Fairy King’s Blessing. Was that how he managed to swallow my attacks with no problem? I knew his skill set, but it was tough to plan around those skills without knowing what they did.

“Your puny attacks are worthless. So stubborn!” The hero swung his sword in a wide arc in the corner of my vision. I’d seen this attack before.

“It’s over for you! Celestial Fall!” This time he didn’t hold back. The attack hit me right in the chest, so hard that my vision warped. I was so badly wounded that I couldn’t even scream.

The hero was in hot pursuit as I fell. I tried to right myself, but I was completely helpless, almost paralyzed. This sucked.

I used Regenerate to try to speed my healing. Somehow I swung myself around so I was no longer falling faceup. There was no time to feel relieved; the hero caught up to me and bashed me in the back with his sword.

“Earth Fall!” My impact with the ground was so great that the sand rippled out from me, as though gravity had inverted. The shockwave took out the storefronts of nearby buildings, rendering them rubble.

My consciousness wavered. I couldn’t move. I felt blood pooling at my back.

“Haah, ha haa...surely after all that, he’s...”

“Raaar!” My other head roared. The pressure on my body eased. *Must have used Hi-Rest.* Suddenly my thoughts were much clearer, and I immediately used Regenerate. “Graaar!” I directed a Whirlwind Slash at the sound of the horse’s whinny before I slowly lifted my head.

“Waaah!” The Pegasus streaked upward to avoid the wind blades while the hero clung tight with both hands. Was he running out of stamina? He’d countered two powerful attacks, not to mention how he’d cast all that stat-raising magic. If I was right and he was depleted, now



was the time to strike.

“Why?! Why won’t you die?” the hero screamed. “Damn it!”

*Because I’m an Ouroboros with bottomless stamina. Any complaints should be directed to the Divine Voice.* Thank God for Regenerate. Without it, that Celestial Fall would’ve been the end of me.

“You’re so insignificant! Where do you get off being such a thorn in my side?!” The Pegasus flew higher, retreating once again. I needed to finish him off before the hero recovered his composure. I jumped back into the sky.

“Raaar!” My other head used Hi-Rest on me again, which healed the remaining damage. Regenerate filled in the gaps, but Rest magic was much more reliable and effective. *Shame I’m not in charge of using it.*

I shot off a Whirlwind Slash at the back of the hero’s head, and another at the Pegasus’s legs.

“Hey! Cut it out!” the hero yelled, urging the Pegasus lower. My first attack only grazed the top of his head, but the second got the Pegasus right in the knee joint.

“Nüiihiiii!” Sharp scythes of wind gouged out the horse’s white flesh, splattering blood. I fired off two more attacks.

“Move, you useless beast! Move!” His words were a waste of breath. Whirlwind Slash severed both the Pegasus’s wings, rendering it unable to fly. It plummeted toward me.

“Damn it!” The hero’s sword arm was shaking. He hadn’t recovered yet. I flew in close and sank my teeth into his back, yanking him off his horse. I left the Pegasus to fall alone.

“Let me go! Let me go!” I streaked upward with the hero clenched in my jaws. I flipped in midair before vaulting harshly in a new direction. Then I dropped, gaining momentum as we fell.

“Physical Barrier! Physical Barrier! Physical Barrier!”

I slammed into the ground headfirst, sending sand flying. My neck hurt. *Okay, that’s still bad even with recovery magic!*

“Graaar!” My other head used a quick Hi-Rest on me. It didn’t sound too hot, judging by its voice.

The hero was no longer in my mouth. He lay on the ground a few yards away, covered in blood. I thought he was dead, but then he

heaved himself to his feet amongst the rubble.

“Argh...dammit, why is this happening? Huh?” The hero stared down at his hand in blank shock, then looked around. He spotted me and sneered. Or—not me. My other head, which sat placidly next to me with the hero’s sword clenched in its jaw.

**Holy Sword Radim: Value A + . Attack: +112.**

**A sword used to expel evil and wipe away darkness. Many demons have fallen before its might. Throughout history, this sword was kept deep in the Harunae temple.**

*Ooh, that sounds tempting. Other Head, where’d you even get a hold of that?*

It must have grabbed it while the hero was falling.

“That’s mine! Give it—”

My other head tipped its snout up, letting the sword slide into its mouth. It gave a huge gulp.

*Um, are you sure you know what you’re doing? Won’t it, you know... wipe away your darkness? Or expel you or something?*

The hero stared at my other head in complete disbelief. His icy gaze moved past me to where the blood-covered Pegasus lay motionless on the ground.

“Useless, all of you!” The hero gritted his teeth and fled.

## Part 4

I CHASED AFTER HIM, of course. The streets were empty; everyone had wisely evacuated. All that remained was a group of knights watching us from a distance, agog with bewildered shock. I couldn't see Nina or Adoff's family, either. *Where did they go?* Hoping that they'd simply been granted their freedom was a bit too optimistic for me.

"Raar!" My other head roared. Following its lead, I saw Adoff, Ballrabbit, and Nina huddling in the shadows of a building. Adoff's family was there too, and so was a knight.

*Oh! I guess I underestimated them!*

The knight was likely one of Adoff's former subordinates. With the suspicion cast on the church and the hero, he'd regained people's trust. I sighed with relief.

"Raaar!" I didn't have time to revel in our victory. My other head roared, which spurred me to pull myself together. We'd made good progress, but I couldn't allow the hero to escape and wreak havoc somewhere else. *You can't trust that guy an inch!*

I shook myself off and gave chase. His stamina would be nearly gone. He'd thrown one of his swords, and we ate the other one. The Pegasus was too seriously wounded to use again. As for his MP...

***Illusia***

***Species: Earth-human***

***Status: Physical Resistance (Major)***

***Lv: 78/100***

***HP: 471/602***

***MP: 144/552***

144. *Yep, that's what happens when you use so much boost magic in a row.* He was choosing not to use Quick during his escape to conserve MP. He had about a quarter remaining. Not a great spot to be at this point in the battle.

My agility was higher than his. I could catch him without any trouble, though I wanted to make sure I did it before he reached any residential districts.

“Summon! Summon! Summon!” Three columns of light appeared between us. It turned out he had other summons besides Pegasus. The ground gleamed and sent sand rising upward...before it exploded. Three reddish-black *somethings* crawled from the resulting hole. They were vaguely human-shaped, but far too narrow. They must have been three meters long.

“Kwaaassh!” An ugly hole in each face stood in for a mouth. One slammed itself into a building and smashed down a wall. This didn’t look at all like something a hero would summon.

**Groundwurm: Rank C-. A giant caterpillar monster that possesses a tough outer body. Normally lives buried underground, but when prey approaches, it will open its large mouth and attack.**

Annoying. Nothing but big worms with stats lower than those of your average red ant. These were a distraction. Did he plan on using the rest of his MP to summon things and have me fight those instead?

I leapt into the air and yanked my other head in. It caught on at once, and we curled up to charge straight at the groundwyrms with Roll. We ran all three of them down and dragged them along behind us.

“Kwaaaaassh?!” Two of them went flying, while the third’s body blasted apart. I was covered in caterpillar guts.

**Gained 456 Experience Points.**

**Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 456 Experience Points.**

**Ouroboros Lv 57 has become Lv 58.**

*Sorry, dude, but that was a crappy distraction. My condolences if that’s the best you could summon with your scraps of MP.*

“Wha—?!” As the hero stared at me in panic, I used Roll to close in and aim a body slam at his back. He sidestepped and drew his third sword. It emitted a sinister light, its blade glowing a dark crimson. This was the sword he’d used to run Adoff through in the desert. His final weapon.

“Just give up! Stop, and I’ll let you live!”

*Should I regroup or just charge right in?* It would be a pity to waste perfect Roll conditions, and the longer this went on the more damage we'd do to Harunae's infrastructure. I had to hit him at max speed, right now, and I'd need to be fully committed. Anything less, and I would make mistakes.

"I'll kill you! I'm gonna kill you!" The first hit from the hero's sword pierced right through my scales. Fatigue spread through my limbs, but that was the worst of it.

"Arrghh!" The hero screamed. I felt the impact of my rolling body against his. Blood flew through the air and he landed in a heap on the sand.

### **Gained Resistance Skill "Confusion Resistance."**

I was poised to celebrate when a swoop of vertigo overtook me. Gaining a new resistance skill always meant I'd sustained a hit from that specific status ailment. *The sword. It has to be the sword.* I couldn't control my direction anymore. I crashed into a wall, sending a spray of rubble raining down on top of me. I crawled out from beneath it, shaking the dust off myself.

*It deals out poison, confusion...and paralysis.* None of them were strong, though. The shock of the impact knocked the worst of the confusion out of me, and the paralysis wasn't effective enough to render me immobile.

The hero was leaning against a wall fractured with a long, splintering crack that was just *begging* me to topple it with Roll. Blood poured freely from a wound in his head, so thick that he could barely open one of his eyes. His shoulders shook as he panted, but the grip on his sword was as sure as ever. Even from this distance I could see his clenched fists.

We'd come some distance into the residential district. People who had fled the execution square milled around, accompanied by the knights who guided them.

The hero tried to stand but fell back down in a rush. If he had broken bones, not even Hi-Rest could give him the strength to keep running.

"H-h-heh heh...way to...piss me off. I'm done caring about this. This country can rot! I'm the only one in the world with Holy, only I can counteract a death spell! You, Adoff, the idiot bishop, and the slave

girl...you're all going to suffer and die!" The hero loved the sound of his own voice. "Why bother chasing me? You'll only regret it when you wake up in Hell!"

I shot a couple of Whirlwind Slashes.

"Summon!" Purple light appeared between us, expanded, and then quickly shrunk to fit the outline of a human shape. *What the heck is that?* Whirlwind Slash sliced through the purple mass, spraying green fluid everywhere. The shape didn't move. *Is it even alive?*

**Monster's rank is too low to gain Experience Points.**

The Divine Voice's message ran through my head. *Did it die or what?* It was moving. Something that looked like an arm and two hollow eyes. I felt the blood drain from my face. I had an incredibly bad feeling about this. *Calm down. If that's a monster the Divine Voice can tell me what it is.*

**Muscas Demi-Liche: Rank F-. A fly that has gained immense magical power due to a curse; each one embodies the curse within itself.**

Long ago, a sorcerer tried to obtain immortality by transforming into a creature made up of a swarm of flies. This is the shade of that former sorcerer, no longer in possession of their own mind. All that remains is a swarm of flies intent on inflicting curses.

When their number dwindles, the flies will scatter to spread curses. They lay eggs equal to the number of the people they curse to death, then once again resume their human shape once they've recouped their numbers.

*What the heck? That's a swarm of flies? That's disgusting!* I couldn't let this thing go buzzing around freely. I had to get rid of it. *This idiot had to drop one last bomb, didn't he?*

I went still and stared at the swarm, this so-called *Muscas Demi-Liche*, not knowing what might provoke it. *Does it have a weakness? Should I use Scorching Breath? Though if the hero interferes, some of the flies might escape.* I could try tempting it away, but I didn't want it chasing me either.

The hero used his sword as a cane to push himself up with, then leaned upon it while moving towards the *Muscas Demi-Liche*.

“Heh heh heh...”

*Uh-oh.* He planned to release the curse himself. I had no plan, but I jumped forward anyway. Each Muscas Demi-Liche was a rank F monster. *There must be something I can do. Oh, I know!*

“Raaar!” I looked at my other head.

“Graah?” It stared back at me uneasily.

“Raaar!” *Death, Death! Use Death on that! They’re such low-level monsters it’ll work! I don’t care if you use all our remaining MP, just kill it!*

If I couldn’t make it understand, everything would be over. *Please, Twin Head.*

I was afraid, but not *too* afraid, because my other head seemed to pick up on what I wanted by sheer instinct. Ballrabbit had been the same way and even learned Telepathy as a result. Would my other head develop it too? Right when I evolved, the head was impossible to manage, but it had calmed when it sensed my unease. It was a part of me, no matter what. Once I’d begun to treat it like that, instead of some alien interloper, it became more cooperative.

**Gained Special Skill “Mutual Understanding” Lv 1.**

My other head nodded.

“Raaar!” It roared at the Muscas Demi-Liche as an aura of black light surrounded it. Wow, it really *did* pour all our MP into this. This casting was far more concentrated than when we’d killed the enemy ant queen. Suddenly, there was an ominous pop.

**Monster’s rank is too low to gain Experience Points.**

**Normal Skill “Death” Lv 1 has become Lv 4.**

The Muscas Demi-Liche’s form stretched out strangely. One hand clawed towards the sky.

“Ooooooh...!” A moan came out of its open mouth, precisely as the hero’s crimson sword sliced it in two. It collapsed into a pile of remains that rolled across the ground.

“Heh heh...now it’s time to...h-huh?” The hero let out a noise of disbelief, staring at the remains of the flies.

**Title Skill “Itty-Bitty Hero” Lv 7 has become Lv 9.**

*Whoa, two levels at once? That guy must’ve been intense!*

“Th-this is impossible!” The hero hit the pile of dead bugs with his sword once, twice, three times, before falling limply to his knees. He scooped up handfuls of flies, the color draining from his face.

He pressed a blood-stained hand to his chest, then against his own cheek. He looked down at his palm, expressionless.

“Hi-Rest! Hi-Rest! Hi-Rest! Aah!” Nothing happened, no blossom of healing light. He had finally used the last of his MP. He was completely powerless. I dashed toward him and swatted him with my claws as hard as I could.

“Arrgh!” He flew backwards and slammed into the side of a building. His sword almost tumbled from his grip, but he held on tight. “Aaah! Get away! Get away, you monster!” He swung the blade in a wide arc and threw his shoulders back against the wall. The crack in the stonework split wide, and the hero scrambled inside. *Is this ever going to end?*



## Part 5

**I** TRACKED HIM THROUGH the building with Psychic Sense, zoning in on a single human form: a man half running, half falling in his desperate attempt to escape. I sensed him pass through the structure and emerge on the other side. Flying out and up would take too long—I curled up and Rolled straight through the walls, as well as the ensuing shower of debris. I emerged just as the last of the building collapsed behind me. *Sorry to whoever owned that, but I was fresh out of other options.*

Sensing something to my right. I turned to find the hero, blood-streaked and seated with his back to a wall. The blood loss had sapped the last of his strength.

*Illusia*

*Species: Earth-human*

*Status: Bleeding (Major)*

*Lv: 78/100*

*HP: 32/602*

*MP: 6/552*

He was on the verge of death. An astonished crowd had gathered to stare at the hero, but they scattered like freshly hatched baby spiders as soon as they spotted me. The hero glared after them, then stood on trembling legs.

“Answer me, Laplace! What...what’s going to happen to me?! What should I do?! Laplace! Answer me!”

I froze. Laplace was a function of the Divine Voice that provided statistics. I remembered the hero had that skill, but I didn’t expect him to just start yelling at it. I guess this was an emergency situation for him, but even so—I avoided that skill like the plague. It just seemed like bad luck.

I moved to attack, when a little girl stumbled out of the crowd.

“Hero!”

Up until now, this guy had been famous and beloved. A child wouldn't understand how badly he'd fallen. I hated to finish him off in front of a kid, but what choice did I have?

I slashed out, but the hero dodged, moving with startling speed considering his condition. He curled up and rolled toward the girl. It wasn't a reckless movement. It was deliberate. He grabbed her and pulled her into his arms.

“Kyaah!”

He leapt to his feet and put his sword to the girl's neck.

“Stay away or I'll kill her! Is that what you want? What's your plan now, huh? Get back! Get back!”

“Wh-why...?” the girl wailed. “N-no, but you're...”

“Shut up! I hate kids! Quit screaming in my ear or I'll kill you right now! Hey, get back! I said, get back!”

*No way. Are you really gonna kill a little girl?!* Shouts and confusion rang out from the crowd.

“Why is the hero doing that?”

“There has to be a reason...surely?”

The hero wasn't listening to them.

“He heh, ah ha ha ha ha! Are you serious? You care about the life of a single child? What kind of monster are you, anyway? You sicken me!” He pulled his sword away from the little girl's neck. I assumed he'd let her go but watched in horror as he slashed her stomach with the crimson blade.

“Aaahhhh!” Blood poured from her mouth.

“*Raaaar!*” I hurtled forward with my claws aimed at the hero's head. He kicked the dying little girl into my path, and I caught her on reflex, careful to sheathe my claws. The hero slashed at my vulnerable leg. “*Raar!*”

“Ah ha ha hah! Idiot! You fool! You fall for it every single time!” The hero brandished his sword at the citizens. How was he doing this while bleeding to death? But now that I took a closer look, his wounds didn't seem as serious as before. Had he healed?

*Oh no.* The blood-covered scabbard of that crimson sword was pulsating. That must be the blade that could draw energy from its victims. He was going after the citizens to suck out their vitality.

*Twin Head. Please.*

“*Raaar!*” My other head gave a roar that enveloped the little girl in a ball of light. I set her gently on the ground.

“Why’d he do that?” the little girl mumbled after me. I turned away from her, desperate to find the hero.

**Title Skill “Itty-Bitty Hero” Lv 9 has become Lv MAX.**

“Look, look! I’m dying, I’m dying, oh no! Ha ha! Ha ha ha!” The hero raised his sword and slashed a village man with the sword, then promptly kicked him to the side of the road. I spread my wings as I jumped in front of him to block his path. “Look, look! Ha ha ha ha... huh?”

I raked my claws across his chest while I lifted him up and brought him back down hard.

“Arghh!” The sword had replenished some of his HP but not much. He wasn’t at full power. His struggling was futile. I wasn’t sure what Laplace had told him, but I doubted it was anything helpful.

“*Raaar!*” Meanwhile, my other head was busy healing the village man. The hero hadn’t killed him after all, probably because he knew I’d waste my time helping.

**Title Skill “Protective Spirit” Lv 9 has become Lv MAX.**

Protective Spirit and Itty-Bitty Hero were both virtuous skills, and they’d both hit MAX level.

“Laplace! This’s not how you said this would go! Save me! Save me!” the hero screeched. “What should I do?! How can I win?! Tell me! Tell me! Stop messing around!”

He flailed his arms and legs. I leaned more weight on the front leg pinning him, causing the ground beneath to crack.

“Oof! Agh!” His sword hit the ground with a metallic clang. “Someone help me! Don’t be stupid! Do you have any idea how many times I’ve saved your hides? If I die, this country will be nothing but trash! You’ll all be ruined!” Most of the crowd had already fled, only about a dozen remaining to watch the denouement. Nobody moved.

I lifted my other leg. It was all over now.

“Aghhhh! Stop! I’m a hero! If the hero dies, no one will be able to slay the Demon King when he appears! People will die! H-he’ll kill you! Stop! Let me go! Let go, I said! I’m a hero! Don’t you understand, you brainless monster?!” He dug his nails into my leg and bit me with his worthless human teeth. He had nothing left.

**Title Skills “Itty-Bitty Hero” Lv MAX and “Protective Spirit” Lv MAX have become “Hero” Lv1.**

*Huh? What?*

**Fulfilled requirements to obtain Sacred Skill “Human Realm Path.”**

*What? Sacred Skill?* That reminded me: The hero had a skill I hadn’t recognized. Was this the same thing?

“Wh-what are you doing?! Quit the mind games, already! You just use me for years and then throw me aside?! What the hell is so divine about you, anyway?!”

The hero must have received one final message from the Divine Voice. He flailed wildly, face red with hatred, but his fists hit nothing but air.

**Gained Sacred Skill “Human Realm Path” Lv —**

**Special Skill “Divine Voice” Lv 4 has become Lv 5.**

**Title Skill “Laplace Authority Interference” Lv 1 has become Lv 2.**

My two shadiest skills just leveled up. Curious, I checked the ailing hero’s status.

***Illusia***

***Species: Earth-human***

***Status: Bleeding***

***Lv: 65/65***

***HP: 18/398***

***MP: 2/355***

***Attack: 272***

**Defense: 214 + 76**

**Magic: 252**

**Agility: 240**

**Equipment:**

**Armor: Water Dragon Robe: B +**

**Special Skills:**

**Spirit's Protection: Lv —**

**Fairy King's Blessing: Lv —**

**Grecian Language: Lv 6**

**Swordsman: Lv 9**

**Psychic Sense: Lv 6**

**Stealth: Lv 7**

**Resistance Skills:**

**Physical Resistance: Lv 6**

**Magic Resistance: Lv 6**

**Dark Type Resistance: Lv 7**

**Illusion Resistance: Lv 5**

**Poison Resistance: Lv 5**

**Curse Resistance: Lv 3**

**Petrify Resistance: Lv 5**

**Instant Death Resistance: Lv 4**

**Paralysis Resistance: Lv 3**

**Normal Skills:**

**Shockwave: Lv 6**

**Deca-Renzuki: Lv 5**

**Lucent Luna: Lv 7**

**Summon: Lv 7**

**Slash: Lv 6**

**Illusion: Lv 3**

**Hi-Rest: Lv 5**

**Quick: Lv 4**

**Power: Lv 5**

**Mana Barrier: Lv 2**

**Physical Barrier: Lv 4**

**Title Skills:**

**Fallen from Grace: Lv —**

**Bug King's Contractor: Lv —**

*Divine Voice is missing.* He'd had so many Title Skills, but the list had been all but cleared out. The bugged out set of skills was gone as well. His stats were down...and his max level had dropped too!

I'd known the Divine Voice was cruel, but seeing it spelled out was intense. It had totally abandoned this guy.

"No more games! Answer me, Laplace! What's going to happen to me?! Answer me!"

Did the Divine Voice plan to betray me the same way? I couldn't think about it right now; I needed to meet more people with the Divine Voice before making any judgment. The hero was a monster, but I was sorry it had to end this way. *I can't bear to watch this anymore. I'll put him out of his misery.*

Then I saw Adoff in the crowd. He'd come along behind us.

*"Raar!"*

He nodded to me as he heaved his way through the crush. I released the hero from my hold, and he scrambled to his feet, grabbing his sword as he went.

"H-ha ha! You let down your guard! I-I can still win! Ha ha ha ha!" He ran, staggering, half-blind from the blood in his eyes. "I'm gonna kill you and everyone in this country! And that worthless god too! I'll kill everyone!" His voice broke hoarsely.

Adoff stood in front of him. The hero laughed, perhaps thinking he could drain his HP. "What do you want from me, you insignificant fool?!" Their swords clashed. "Drop your sword! Yes, take that!"

The Prisoner's Mark was still in effect. Adoff's sword clattered to the dust.

“Now it’s time for you to die!” the hero screamed.

Adoff crouched, dodging the slash. He rolled behind him, quickly regaining his feet and picking up his sword as he went.

“H-huh?” The hero had lost sight of him, so the attack from his blind spot took him by surprise. Adoff knocked him off balance, whacking him in the stomach with the flat of the blade. The hero fell. “Arrgh!”

“So confident in your superiority. You really ought to be more thorough in your commands.”

“Ad—”

Adoff did not wait for the hero to finish. He thrust his sword into his chest and out the other side.





**Gained 1040 Experience Points.**

**Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 1040 Experience Points.**

**Ouroboros Lv 58 has become Lv 60.**

After a long and grueling fight, the hero was dead. The experience points I gained barely matched what I’d gotten from the giant centipede; perhaps because his stats had gone down.

**Gained Skill “Soul Addition (Fake Life)” Lv 1.**

*Whoof, creepy.*

“Thank you, Dragon.” Adoff let his sword fall. “I shall never wield a sword again. Take it, it’s yours.”

## Part 6

**A**DOFF LED ME to the deserted execution site. All the citizens had been evacuated, leaving three knights in the shadows; they trembled when they saw me but did not draw their swords. Behind them stood Ballrabbit and Nina. She was safe! She didn't have a scratch on her. The knights must have protected her on Adoff's orders. I sighed in relief. Adoff's family would be safe too—I figured they'd already been taken somewhere more secure.

Nina looked up at my face. "Mr. Dragon, is that you?"

My other head tried to stretch out toward her, and I quickly shoved it aside. *Be good. Technically you are me, but there's no need to confuse her.*

"Mr. Dragon! Thank you so, so much! I'm nobody, just some slave who was abandoned by her parents, and yet...and yet you did all of this for me, and...!" Nina's sobs broke apart the last of her words, and she collapsed to her knees. I gently patted her head with my front leg, careful to keep my claws sheathed. I'd given up on ever touching a human like this again back when I evolved into a Plague Dragon, but it turned out you could never predict what might happen in your life. Or...your second life, in my case.

*I've caused enough commotion. I shouldn't overstay my welcome.*

"Raar?" I said, looking at Adoff. ("*He says. What you do now. Adoff?*") Ballrabbit translated for me.

"The church will remove my Mark and clear my name, and I'll see my family settled. And then I'll leave this place."

A good idea. I wanted to ask him to take Nina, but Adoff and the knights would have their hands full dealing with the church. If he vanished now, he'd never sort his affairs out. I worried he might not sort them out even if he stayed. What if the church locked him up again?

"Don't worry. Not even they can sweep something witnessed by hundreds of people under the rug. They'll do everything they can to distance themselves from Illusia, but their influence will be significantly weakened by what happened today. They'll no longer be allowed to rule

with impunity.”

*O-oh, well, that’s good. Agh, it still weirds me out when you use my name to refer to him.*

*(“Adoff.”)*

“Hm?”

*(“Name. Illusia.”)*

Ballrabbit sent Adoff a message, glancing meaningfully in my direction. I never told it my name, so it must have read my thoughts.

Adoff tensed up for a few seconds, before he understood and guilt twisted his features. “I see. I wondered why you always responded strangely when I said it. Who in the world gave you a name like that? Sorry, that was rude.”

*I promise, I used to be a lot cuter!*

“Now that the hero is gone, chances are the surrounding countries will cease sending us aid,” Adoff mused as he glanced toward the towers of a tall, ornate building. I guessed that was the church.

*Really? I feel kinda bad about that.*

“Sorry. You need not worry about it. The church hoarded the wealth, so when everything is said and done, conditions shouldn’t change overmuch.”

*That still doesn’t sound promising, either.* Full disclosure—I was worried about Harunae, even while knowing there was nothing I could do about it. I crouched down and let Nina and Ballrabbit on my back. “Raaar!”

Adoff nodded. “If not for you, that evil man would have spent the rest of his life wreaking havoc, denying me my revenge. I thank you from the bottom of my heart, Dragon...er, I mean...Illusia.”

He didn’t need a translation to recognize my goodbye.

I leapt into the sky, the buildings of the walled city shrinking into dots as I climbed. Adoff’s upturned face became little more than a distant smudge.

“Mr. Dragon! Your name is Illusia?” Nina called from my back. “That’s really pretty, and it suits you so well, nyaah! May I call you that from now on?”

“From now on” struck me, and it took me a while to respond.

“*Raar!*” My other head took it upon itself to answer for me. *You little... Well, it's not like my answer would be any different.*

I glanced back at Nina. She was looking at me, appearing to instinctually know which head was mine. Or maybe she read the answer in my eyes. “Um, Illusia? Can I stay with you from now on?”

I hesitated a bit, but then I shook my head. There was no point in lying.

“Oh...right... of course. I shouldn't cause more trouble for you.”

Nina was undoubtedly afraid of human villages. Humans had sold her into slavery, after all, and threw her to a giant centipede, and then nearly executed her in public. That would traumatize anyone. The situation hadn't changed, though. I still had Dragon Scale Powder, and so long as she stayed with me, her symptoms would crop up again. Traveling with a dragon was dangerous enough even without that complication, and now I had the Divine Voice to worry about as well. Nina wouldn't be safe with us.

“I'm sorry, nyaah...” she murmured. “I could tell you were only trying to get rid of me to save my life, actually. I could tell from the sad look on your face... I'm sorry if I made you feel guilty, nyaah.”

*Hm? Humans can understand monsters' expressions?*

Nina's stats weren't high enough to survive in a monster's world. Humans—even demi-humans—were best suited to their own kind. I envied her.

*Ballrabbitt, give her a message.*

“Pfeff?”

*There's a country nearby that wants Harunae to release their demi-human slaves. Tell her I'm going to take her there.*

(“Nina. Come with. Us?”)

*You know she can't.*

(“But...”)

*I want to her to stay with us too. And I know that you must be able to read her mind and see how terrified of humans she is—I understand that. I still can't let her stay with us. She'd die. I'm gonna take her to the country Adoff recommended. Her luck will be substantially better in a place like that.*

*You don't want her to die, do you?*

*"Pfeff..."*

*Yeah, I'm worried about her too. Do you think I like abandoning her in some strange place? All I know about Ardesia is what Adoff told us. I have no idea what kind of life she'll have there. It might not be ideal, but it's the only choice we've got.*

## Part 7

**W**E FLEW FOR half a day. The moon rose as we flew, cloaking the desert in darkness, and its ascent was accompanied by a giant, walled city emerging out of the gloom. It had to be the country Adoff told us about: Ardesia. Any closer, and we ran the risk of humans spotting me. I landed some distance away to consider my next move.

This place had its own magical stone barrier, which lowered the risk of a monster attack out here, but I'd prefer to escort Nina all the way to Ardesia regardless. I could use Human Transformation, but I wasn't at full power yet. Though I'd entered Harunae with my face concealed, I didn't know if that would work on the road to Ardesia—and anyway, rumors would be circulating about a dragon pretending to be a human by now. *No idea how Adoff and Hagen are gonna explain that one away.* The citizens would interpret it however the church spun it.

Once word spread about the Drago-human and his Felis-human companion, Ardesia's impression of Nina might worsen. Adoff mentioned Harunae could have offered Nina to Ardesia as a show of goodwill, and I wanted to believe he had worked some magic to make that happen...but even then, I didn't want to make Nina's situation any harder than it had to be. Better to say goodbye here and watch over her from afar.

"Illusia, Bally... Thank you so much for everything, nyaah. We'll see each other again, right?"

Neither I nor Ballrabbit knew what to say.



*“Raar!” My other head answered for me again. Seriously, you really need to learn how to read the room! Or are you doing that despite reading the room?*

*“Raar!” I answered after my twin head.*

*Ballrabbit? Ballrabbit? What’s the matter? This is it, so you’d better say something while you can.*

All of a sudden, a presence flared behind me. A human one, and it was trying to sneak up unnoticed. *Uh-oh. I should have been more careful this close to Ardesia.* I turned slowly with a light sweep of my tail. *Don’t want anyone to get hurt.* Dust billowed, and the tip of my tail connected with something, whacking it back and away. Whoever was behind us had their guard up.

*“Arrgh?!”* A man with ultramarine hair fell backwards onto the sand.

*“Get back, you fool!”* a man on horseback admonished him from some distance away. *“Cain, what do you think you’re doing? We don’t stand a chance against something that big. Run back home and sound the alarm!”*

*“B-but it’s attacking a girl and a rabbit!”* The man with the ultramarine hair, Cain, stood up. He’d bitten his lip when he hit the ground. Now blood seeped from his mouth, though he rushed to wipe it away with the back of his hand. His vambrace was broken from that single measly swipe of my tail.

*I get why he assumed I was attacking Nina, but Ballrabbit too? Wait.* I remembered Adoff said that humans loved Ballrabbits and kept them as pets.

*“We’re the only ones who saw it,”* said the man on horseback. *“If the dragon kills us, they’ll have no forewarning. People could die.”*

*“Then it’s simple, we make sure one of us survives! You run back home!”*

*“Tch! I swear, you’ve got a death wish. Suit yourself!”* The man on the horse rode in a wide circle to avoid me. He set off back toward Ardesia.

*“You!”* Cain called to Nina. *“Are you okay, miss?”*

*“W-wait, a second! You’ve got it wrong! Illus—the dragon, he*



saved—”

I whapped my tail on the ground, splitting it open and shaking it so violently that Nina fell down.

“Damn it! I’ll save you, miss!” Cain drew his sword and lunged.

Telling them she was a dragon’s traveling buddy would make a terrible first impression. With no hope of getting into Ardesia unnoticed, it was better they thought I was menacing her. She’d have to explain how she got here, but she could claim she’d walked or hitched a ride on a passing carriage. I glared at my other head, willing it not to do anything stupid.

“Raaaaaar!” I roared and stomped, right in front of Cain. He leapt in and brandished his sword at my face.

“Flame Slash!” His blade glowed with heat, slashing across my cheek.

“Graaar!” My plan was to swoon dramatically, but that was a good hit. No need to fake anything here, this guy was stronger than he looked.

I backed away at once. A solid hit was all the excuse I needed to leave.

“Pfeff?!” Ballrabbit dropped from my head, folding its ears underneath it to cushion its fall. This little guy sure was something. I tried to scoop it back up, when I realized it was staring at Nina. She was still lying on the ground.

*You’re worried about her, aren’t you? I don’t blame you. You two got really close on this journey. You could go with her into Ardesia. I’d feel a lot better knowing she has a bodyguard. You’re smart. You’d be a big help.*

Ballrabbit looked at me.

*I don’t have Telepathy. I can’t read your mind...but I know you’ve been planning to go with her for a while.*

“P-pfeff...” Its expression was guilty. It didn’t bother with Telepathy; I knew what its answer was.

“Waaaaah!” Cain charged me again. I looked away from Ballrabbit and stepped backwards. I leapt into the air at the same moment that Cain swung his sword. Once I was a safe distance away, I looked back. Cain had lowered his sword, relief in the set of his shoulders. Ballrabbit

was still watching me.

*“Pfeff! Pffeeeff!”*

*Thanks, Ballrabbit. I was never lonely in the desert with you around. You made sure there was never a dull moment, and you saved me so many times. Life is weird like that, isn't it? I picked you up on a whim, hoping you'd dig me a house. Maybe that was just an excuse, though. Maybe what I wanted...was a friend.*

I flew due east. I knew I shouldn't keep looking back; it might tip Cain off that something weird was going on. All the same, I glanced behind me again and again until Ballrabbit was nothing but a tiny dot in the distance.

## Bonus Story 1: The Former Knight Commander's Continuing Story

### Part 1 Adoff

A WEEK HAD PASSED since a wicked dragon invaded Harunae and killed the hero Illusia, when the church summoned Adoff to the temple. He'd had every intention to be far away from the city by now, but the church had yet to remove his Prisoner's Mark, trotting out excuse after excuse to delay. The Mark was a magical brand placed upon one's body, and only the church had the power to rescind it. They were taking every chance to drag their feet, even in spite of how Adoff had proven his innocence.

Removing his Mark would give legitimacy to the story now circulating amongst the citizenry regarding the hero. They didn't want the public to know the whole truth and would do everything they could to maintain a sliver of public support. They needed an alternate story but had no clue how much to tell or who to blame. To top it all off, there was infighting in the church.

They called Adoff in today because they'd finally come up with a solution.

*Which may very well be my death,* Adoff thought as he walked down the temple corridor.

The official story was that the hero Illusia had been killed while protecting the people of Harunae. In truth, Adoff was the one who killed Illusia; he had a suspicion that this was why the church had summoned him.

The church officials had never liked him, tired as they were of his countless calls for ecclesiastical reform. He couldn't envision a scenario where they'd help him, but he couldn't desert them easily either. A Prisoner's Mark guaranteed that he'd be treated as a criminal wherever he went. No place would take him in.

"Sir Adoff, thank you for coming."

Adoff stepped into the bishop's room as the man finished dismissing his disciple. The bishop clearly wanted no witnesses. After a few moments of hesitation, the holy man began, "Sir Adoff, I would ask you to return to the knights and take your place as commander again. You have the love of the people, and your steady hands and sober mind have been invaluable in the chaos of the last few weeks. Harunae is on the verge of collapse—it's clear that the only way to preserve order is to reinstate you. Some of my colleagues spoke against it, but I insisted. This is my price to restore your reputation and clear you of all charges."

Adoff was lost for words at this pure, unabashed selfishness. The bishop would claim it was for Harunae's sake, or for Adoff's, but his real objective was to restore the church's power. He was aware of how obvious he was being; he wouldn't meet Adoff's eyes.

"As I've told you before," Adoff began, "an injury sustained in the desert means I am no longer capable of wielding a sword."

"That's neither here nor there. This is your honor that's at stake."

*The church's honor, more like.* He refused to admit his obvious agenda, which annoyed Adoff even more. It was good, however, to know they held him to such a high worth—that meant they wouldn't kill him. Adoff suppressed his anger and tried to think rationally. The fate of his family depended on this meeting.

"If you summoned me here, you must have completed your investigation. Will you tell me the results?"

The bishop hated direct questions. Adoff knew that. This question was especially contentious, as it was asked purely out of spite—no investigation would ever be necessary. The church knew what had happened. They'd known a long time ago. What Adoff wanted to know was which line they planned to sell to the public.

"On his way home from Harunae, Illusia was attacked by the wicked dragon. Its cursed breath turned him into a demon. That's why he falsely accused you, attacked the citizens, and said all those cruel things..." The bishop trailed into silence.

The lie was staggering, but Adoff wasn't surprised. He'd expected something exactly along these lines. The first story the church had spread, some tale of the hero dying while protecting a child from the dragon, had been discredited instantly and caused even more damage in the process. Their new plan was to deny the hero all agency in his

misdeeds.

“We discovered an error when calculating the calendar dates,” the bishop went on. “The man called Illusia was no true hero after all. That was why he succumbed so easily to the dragon’s curse. In ten years, the *true* hero will be born according to God’s will. That is who will slay the Demon King, should it ever appear.”

Adoff’s sense of integrity was too great to let that one slide. “You saw yourself what happens to a young man when he is spoiled and indulged in his every desire. Yet you plan to do it all over again, while swindling funds and support out of other countries to make it happen? How ironic that you call Illusia a demon. You’re the ones who made him that way, not a dragon’s curse.”

“How dare you?!” The bishop’s face turned bright red. He thumped a fist on the desk, took a gulp of water, and let out a ragged breath. “Sir Adoff, please think carefully. What will happen to this country and its people, should we lose that aid? When you are once again Knight Commander, you can assure for yourself that the donations are allocated where they should be. The two of us share a common goal—it would be foolish to act against your own interest. Selfish vendettas have no place in government. One cannot act the greedy child and expect progress!”

Adoff laughed softly. “You’re a convincing man, Bishop. Fine. I’ll consider your offer...but first, you will remove the Prisoner’s Mark.”

The bishop sighed with relief. “I’m sure this is obvious, but you must never repeat anything regarding the hero aloud.”

“I won’t, as long as no harm is brought to me or my family.” Adoff gave an elaborate bow.

Irritated as he was by Adoff’s manner, the bishop’s relief at his capitulation overruled everything else. His heart finally felt calm.

Much of the backlash towards the church derived from the bungled investigation of Adoff’s brother and fiancée’s murders. Peace with Adoff would go a long way toward restoring the church’s power and authority. The tale of Illusia’s dragon curse would go further in proving Adoff’s innocence, something that the public already believed in.

The bishop removed Adoff’s Prisoner’s Mark without further complaint.

The next day, the bishop received a letter with the news that Adoff had taken himself and his family out of Harunae.

The letter read: *On second thought, I'll just flee the country.*

Any interest he'd shown in the bishop's scheme had been purely to force the removal of the Mark.

As he read the letter, all the color drained from the bishop's face. He was mad with rage, but what could he do? Sending men to drag Adoff back would only make the church's position worse. Harunae was a small, weak country that only asserted its independence on religious grounds. It relied on aid from neighboring nations to survive. The bishop was in no position to demand the return of a missing former knight.

He could see now that Adoff's promise was a threat—he'd keep his mouth shut as long as the church never made a move against him. Otherwise, he would leak the truth of the hero's cruelty and ruin Harunae forever. With gritted teeth, the bishop took the single option available to him: He let Adoff go.

## Part 2

**A**DOFF HEADED FOR ARDESIA, another country that bordered the desert, as well as the place he'd recommended to the dragon Illusia as a safe haven for the demi-human. Relocation to Ardesia made sense; it was nearby. That wasn't the only reason: Here he could see what had become of Nina.

Ardesia boasted of its tolerance for demi-humans, but that didn't necessarily speak for all of its citizens. While Adoff felt obligated to the dragon, he also wanted to ensure that Nina was safe for his own peace of mind.

"Nina? Hmm...we get a lot of immigrant demi-humans here." The man shook his head.

"I see." Adoff had asked all over the place, but no luck so far. Ardesia was a common destination for demi-human refugees. "She might have been traveling with a peach-colored ballrabbit...?"

"Oh! Hey, I *have* heard about that!"

"You have?"

"Yep. I don't know about the demi-human, but crimson ballrabbits are rare. I'm pretty sure I know the one you're talking about."

A ballrabbit only evolved into a peach ballrabbit under special conditions. The standard evolution chain went thus: miniature ballrabbit, small ballrabbit, ballrabbit, and if they lasted long enough, they'd evolve into a giant ballrabbit. The jump from small ballrabbit to peach ballrabbit was relatively rare.

"Go to The Cat's Ears. There's a red ballrabbit there who can use Telepathy."

Adoff shoved a handful of bills at the man—both as thanks, and to wring out a few more details—before departing for the bar called The Cat's Ears. It was a small building tucked away from the busier streets. Its exterior looked like any ordinary house, with a lone sign to proclaim it as a place of business. Despite all that, it seemed like a popular spot. It was only early evening, but chatter rose from inside, moderate and calm. The clientele seemed civil enough.

Adoff went in and immediately spotted a flash of peach-colored fur. Ballrabbit. It sat on a little rug away from the tables, perhaps so that its fur didn't get in the food. Before it sat a man with a beet-red face who was complaining at a high volume and clearly very drunk. A half-full glass sat beside him.

"No matter what I do, nothin' ever goes my way. Startin' to think I should pack it in, try summat else..."

"Pfeff..." Ballrabbit listened to the man sympathetically, nodding along. Though anyone could tell it was responding via Telepathy, that didn't make it any less comical to watch. The other customers occasionally glanced over at the drunk, laughing or teasing him good-naturedly.

"I swear, Bally...you're the only one I can rely on to tell it like it is." The drunk attempted to grab Ballrabbit in a hug but knocked his drink over instead. Ballrabbit caught the glass with one ear and gently patted the drunk's head with the other.

"What the hell," Adoff muttered. Ballrabbit looked around. They locked eyes.

(*"Adoff...?"*)

Adoff heard the Telepathy and nodded, still stunned. A waitress quickly rushed over.

"S-so sorry, but there aren't any tables open at the—nyaaah?!" The girl had blue-tinted hair and pointed canines. Her eyes were big and almond-shaped, like a cat's. There was no doubt about it: this was the demi-human, Nina.

When Adoff last saw her, she was in worn-out rags. Now she wore a clean, cream-colored dress and a pressed white apron.

"A-Adoff?"

"I'm glad to see you're doing well," Adoff smiled. "This seems like a nice place to work. Can we talk when you get a minute? After closing, maybe...or tomorrow, if that's easier?"

"Yes! Today is just fine!" Nina nodded several times, slightly flustered.

"Hey, hey, Nina! I didn't know you had such a handsome boyfriend! Cain's gonna be inconsolable!" Ballrabbit's drunk friend teased her as the other customers laughed.



“Y-you’ve got it all wrong! A-and I’m not dating Cain...” Nina went bright red despite her protests. Adoff chuckled and left The Cat’s Ears for the time being.

He returned once night fell and the bar had closed. On his way there, he passed two men who’d been drinking elsewhere.

“I heard a two-headed dragon attacked Harunae.”

He hadn’t meant to eavesdrop, but the mention of Harunae made his ears prick up.

“That’s terrifying. I can’t believe it killed Master Illusia.”

“I heard the saint from that one country is investigating it. That must mean the dragon answers to the Demon King, yeah?”

Adoff stopped and turned to stare at the two men.

The Demon King was the king of all monsters, said to only appear every five hundred years. In theory, God sent a hero and a saint to the world to save humanity from his reign. With the hero dead, humanity was down to a single protector.

The story was centuries old, and who knew if there was any truth to it? Adoff didn’t regret killing the hero. Even if it meant the entire world was against him, he’d do it all over again.

He pushed away these dark thoughts as he went back into The Cat’s Ears. The owner had kindly allowed them to meet after hours. He found Ballrabbit sitting at a table beside Nina.

“An Ardesian soldier met me on the way,” Nina explained. “He helped me get this job.”

“I got to know the dragon over the few days you were imprisoned. He was so worried about you,” Adoff told her. “I’m so pleased to see you’re living peacefully.”

“Pfeff...”

Ballrabbit’s ears drooped when Adoff mentioned the dragon. It must be worried about Illusia too. They’d known each other for almost the whole time the dragon had been in the desert, and his loneliness had been obvious from the start.

“He was a strange dragon, wasn’t he?” Adoff went on. “I’d never met such a caring, friendly monster of that size. I regret attacking him when we met.”

Nina nodded. "At first I was terrified he might eat me, but he comforted me whenever I was upset. He worked so hard to make sure I never got hurt. He was such a kind dragon."

"Pfeff..."

Adoff noticed that Nina's speech had become significantly more mature since he last saw her, but didn't bring it up. Adoff, Nina, and Ballrabbit reminisced for a time about the frightening, kind, and admittedly strange dragon friend of theirs. Adoff glanced at the clock to discover it was later than he'd thought.

"Ah, forgive me. I'm sure you have plans tomorrow, and here I am rambling away. I only meant to take a few minutes of your time."

"Oh, not at all! Please come back anytime!" Nina said with a smile. Adoff felt himself smiling too.

"I'm glad to see you looking so well. You seem much happier... hm?" Adoff rose from his chair and squinted at a slender white rod hanging on the wall. "Is that a monster's...spine?"

Nina covered her mouth to stifle her laughter. "Actually, that's my first fishing pole!"

"Fishing pole? That thing?" It was incredibly rickety; Adoff couldn't imagine catching anything with it.

Nina giggled.

"Mr. Dragon made it for me. I thought I lost it, but Bally was storing it the whole time." Adoff imagined a huge dragon meticulously crafting a fishing pole out of old bones. It was such a funny image he couldn't help laughing. "The ocean's nearby, so I fish often. If I ever meet Mr. Dragon again, I want to catch him a feast."

Adoff smiled. "Good luck catching enough to satisfy that giant stomach."

He bid them goodbye and left The Cat's Ears.

## Bonus Story 2: The Girl's Even Farther Away Journey

### Myria

**I**N THE COUNTRY OF ARDESIA, near the edge of the Harunae Desert, lay a city called Roburg. It was large and splendid, its prosperity rivaled only by the Royal Capital. Two female adventurers walked along the streets of a shopping district there, followed closely by a two-meter-long black lizard.

One of the women, Myria, had her hair cut into a short bob. She possessed a youthful air of innocence. The other woman, a golden-haired swordswoman, was named Meltia.

The giant lizard was of the monster species Venom Princess Lacerta. Adventurers were known to occasionally train highly intelligent monsters as their familiars, so as long as she stayed by Myria's side, no one gave them a second look.

Myria and Meltia were searching for a dragon that had gone missing in Noah's Forest and had already spent several trips searching the deep woods. Whether by coincidence or fate, they'd encountered the black lizard during one such expedition and formed a group to comb the forest together.

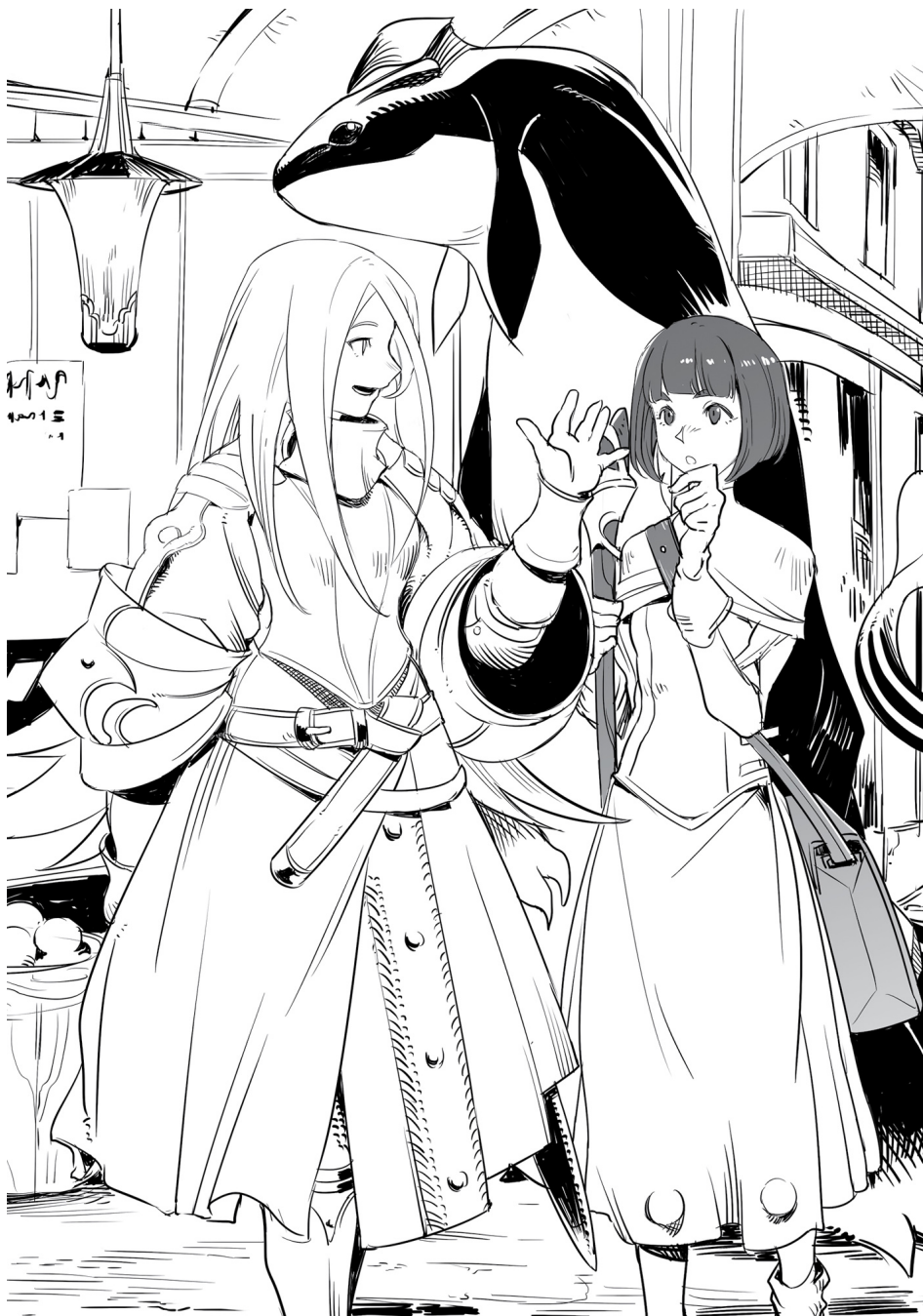
Unfortunately, those woods contained dangerous monsters and a strange tribe living in the depths. Meltia cautioned against further exploration, so they'd instead resolved to skirt the forest and inquire about the dragon in the town on the far side.

"Ohhh, I'm so tired." The instant they stepped into their room at the inn, Myria tossed aside her staff and flopped down on the bed.

The giant lizard glanced at her and then examined the room. It let out a "*shuuu*" noise that sounded like a sigh. What passed for its facial expression looked perfectly like a pout.

Meltia found the giant lizard's and Myria's contrasting behavior so funny that she started to giggle. Myria blinked her eyes open and sat up at once, blushing. "Sorry, I..."

“It’s all right. I know you’re exhausted. Rest is good.”



“Kssh!”

“See? Lacerta agrees.”

Myria had no reply for that. Meltia couldn’t understand the monster’s language—it was just another one of her jokes. She smoothed over tense situations with laughter, even if her sense of humor wasn’t very good. Myria figured it was because the rest of her was so very serious.

Meltia stood at the window and looked out over Roburg. The buildings here could reach three or four stories high; the street pulsed with throngs of people. She’d never seen such a bustling district.

“I haven’t been here in a while, but it’s a good city,” she said. “Did you know it’s called the sacred city of adventurers? There’s an adventurers’ guild here, and the promise of good customers brings in merchants and keeps prices low. You can get your pick of the best weapons, armor, and accessories. Oh, and there’s a famous spot a few days away where you can hunt monsters.

“It’s the best location for our base of operations—you’re sure to become a powerful mage here. My usual white mage, Romeena, has been so busy lately. With you in the party, we’ll be able to reach more places and take on better jobs.”

“I thought we came here to gather information about Illusia—I mean, the dragon,” said Myria, who was hearing these plans for the first time.

“Hm? Of course,” Meltia said swiftly. “That’s our main goal, yes.”

“I don’t mean that I’m opposed to your plans. You’ve helped me out so much, I certainly owe you,” Myria said with a sheepish grin.

Meltia grinned back, smoothing over the awkwardness. “I’m sure we’ll find something here. The dragon we’re following defeated the Little Rock Dragon—it has to be at least a rank B monster, and there aren’t many dragons in that class. Chasing down any rumors will be dangerous, though.”

“I know.” Myria felt stirrings of conscience about further involving Meltia in her quest. The dragon had rescued her when she was injured deep in the forest by carrying her back to her village. He seemed so happy when Myria gave him a name, and when she told him the village was in danger, she’d wanted to believe he was fighting to

save them. That didn't change that he'd killed a villager.

It would be tough to escape from him if he proved unfriendly, especially if he was a rank B monster as Meltia said.

Myria continued to consider the dragon a precious friend, one to whom she owed her life and the lives of the other villagers. She would readily risk it all to find him, but there was no reason for Meltia to do the same. She had no obligation to track down a dragon. Meltia was a mercenary for hire, and although she praised Myria's skills and often gushed about how fortunate she was to have her, Myria couldn't help but feel that most of it was flattery.

"We can hammer out our plans when we have more information," Meltia was saying. "Oh, c'mon, Lacerta. You look so unhappy. Don't tell me you're searching for the dragon too?"

Lacerta ducked away from Meltia's hand when she reached for her.

"Lacerta's a dignified lady," Myria said. "She won't even let me pet her. I know she's cute, but you shouldn't tease her—you *really* don't want her to bite you."

Venom Princess Lacerta ranked among the most dangerous venomous monsters out there. A bite was very difficult to cure. Even a scratch from those lizards could prove fatal.

"All right," Meltia sighed, though her hand hovered in the air above Lacerta. The lizard glanced up at Meltia and then turned away in a huff to curl her body up, pillowing her head on her tail.

The next day, Myria and Meltia headed to a local tavern to gather information. They timed their visit to just after sunset, when the bars were open but not yet crowded. Gossip here flowed as freely as drink, and in an establishment frequented by adventurers, talk would doubtless turn to high-ranked monsters.

They'd been forced to leave Lacerta at the inn. Though they might have gotten permission to bring her into the tavern, they didn't want to turn the customers against them by setting down a poisonous lizard next to their food.

"Heard anything about a powerful dragon that's been spotted around here? Rank B or higher? We'll pay handsomely for the information," Meltia opened as she sat down to address the tavern

owner.

“Hmm, a dragon? Well, a dragon did attack Harunae.”

“Harunae?” Meltia repeated. “The sacred city of heroes? I didn’t know about that.”

“The hero fought it tooth and nail,” the owner went on. “But he died of his wounds. Authorities don’t seem to want word getting around. We don’t have all the details yet, but we will. I have a friend who owns a bar in the next town over, actually, and he hired on a catgirl who supposedly got caught up in the commotion. Want me to introduce you?”

Meltia glanced at Myria, who struggled to keep her expression neutral. Clearly she both hoped and feared that this was the dragon they were looking for.

It wasn’t rare for monsters to evolve into much more violent forms. What was once a harmless creature could become a vicious beast in a moment. Myria had attended a lecture on monsters for Lacerta’s familiar permit; she knew all of this. It could well have happened to her dragon.

Slowly, Meltia shook her head. “The dragon we’re looking for isn’t strong enough to invade a country and escape unscathed. Doesn’t Harunae have a squadron of knights? The hero was born there, they must be well fortified against monster attack.”

Myria’s dragon had evolved recently—another evolution would take years. It would be nearly impossible for the monster that disappeared from Noah’s Forest to gain enough power to invade Harunae, defeat its knights, and fatally wound the hero in such a short time.

To be fair, Meltia was unaware that Harunae’s forces were only so large because they swelled their ranks through nepotism and that all the offerings from surrounding nations were hoarded by the church. Nor could she know that the dragon in question possessed a skill that doubled his experience points and had allied with red ants to grind enough levels to take out the hero.

“Sorry, that’s all I know,” the owner said. “Oh, wait. I heard that someone mentioned they’d spotted a large monster flying towards Noah’s Forest. Don’t know if it was a dragon, though.”



Myria's face fell. "We already came from Noah's Forest..."

Noah's Forest was large, and the western section that bordered the Harunae Desert was well known to be dangerous. Myria's village stood on the eastern side, where most of the monsters were low ranked. They'd come to Roburg expressly to *avoid* the other half of the forest.

"Well, I can't speak for your circumstances," the owner went on, "but you'd be wise to steer clear. I'm sure you've heard of the Lithovar Tribe. They kidnap travelers and sacrifice them to their evil god."

"R-right."

"You came all the way to the sacred city of adventurers. Stay a while longer, maybe you'll find something out," the owner suggested. Myria nodded.

Meltia breathed a sigh of relief. She was hoping Myria wouldn't immediately want to jump back into Noah's Forest, since she was hard to dissuade whenever she set her mind to something.

"I suppose," Myria said, "today was only our first day of searching. We should try again tomorrow."

In spite of herself, Myria wondered if the dragon might be in the western part of the forest after all. She had a creeping feeling that they'd end up there, but the dangers had convinced her to try Roburg instead. Now, the first clue they'd found in town led right back to the forest. She and those woods were entwined in an inescapable fate.

Myria was well aware she couldn't survive the forest on her own. Her best bet would be to stay in Roburg and hone her skills. Only then could she return.

## **Bonus Story 3: An Old Swordsman's Gourmet Journey**

### **Morgle Risotto**

**A**NISE HOWGLEY was once a legendary adventurer, known the world over for defeating a B-rank Rock Dragon all on his own. Monsters of that rank were very dangerous indeed and fully capable of bringing calamity to the world. For a long time, it was believed only legendary heroes and saints could defeat one on their own. Anise Howgley was the only person in recorded history to prove that false.

"I want to travel around freely," he would always say, "and do as I please."

People tried to bend him to their will on occasion, but Anise refused to bend a knee even when faced with dozens of threatening soldiers. He flitted about disarmingly, as if in an intricately choreographed dance. The soldiers soon forgot their desire to fight him and instead lay down their swords and applauded.

He was widely regarded as a fellow of great character. Though a skilled hunter, he only killed monsters who strayed too close to human villages or what was necessary to fill his belly. It mattered not how poisonous or grotesque the monster was—he would find some way to cook it up. After a while, people began to refer to him jokingly as a "Bizarre Gastronomist." Anise was fond of the nickname and often used it himself.

His meritorious deeds were much-exaggerated by minstrels and bards, who all told "The Epic Tale of the Hero Howgley." Then, one day, he disappeared. The rumor was that he'd died, and so the world slowly forgot his name.

In southern Ardesia stood the Charon Ruins, rumored to be built by priests of a barbarian tribe to honor a sacred monster. The tribe itself was destroyed a long time ago, and no one knew what monster it had allegedly enshrined. It was dark and vast, likely to collapse at any moment, and it was overrun by monsters. Very few dared to venture there, leaving its interior shrouded in mystery.

One day, a group of adventurers chanced to brave the Charon Ruins: a party of three swordsmen who called themselves The Nothomb Gladiators, after the town where they met. An inexperienced group to be sure, but due to their quick wits—and a certain amount of luck—they'd seen as much action as any seasoned adventurers. This had the unfortunate side effect of giving them an inflated sense of confidence.

“Damn it... How did this happen?!”

The leader of the Nothomb Gladiators was an eighteen-year-old youth named Palja. As soon as they'd entered the ruins, all three of the Gladiators had been attacked by a pure white monster with six long legs and a huge mouth, and somewhere in the scuffle Palja had gotten separated from his comrades after declaring the monster an unbeatable foe. The other two had run for the exits, while Palja ran deeper into the ruins to draw the creature's attention.

The monster then burrowed itself into a little hole in the wall. That was fine. But now Palja had no idea where he was. And he could hear other creatures making weird noises. “*Nuuu, nuuu!*” More than one, certainly.

He didn't dare light a torch and risk bringing attention to himself. Due to his deep sense of integrity as their leader, he'd allowed his comrades to escape to safety...but he was rapidly coming to regret that show of magnanimity.

Palja had no choice but to wait until the monsters fell asleep before he risked running for the exit. No telling how long that would take. He was frightened, cold, and starving, and the combination made him twitchy and on edge. Sitting there surrounded by stone walls in that long, dark corridor, minutes felt like hours. Every breath pulled more freezing air inside his lungs. He needed to cough. He bit his own fist to suppress it.

After five hours had passed like this, Palja felt close to a nervous breakdown. The monsters were *still* making their creepy noises.

Suddenly, a voice spoke from the darkness. “Hey there, lad. You all right? Why are you crouching on the floor like that? Can you walk?”

“Waaaah!” Palja was too startled to hold back a scream.

“You can't see in the dark? Flame!” The man intoned a spell. Soon he held fire in his cupped hand that revealed his face to Palja. He was short and quite old, wearing a light sword on one hip that resembled

the sort children might spar with.

“Watch out!” Palja hissed. “The fire will attract those monsters!”

“Morgles only sleep once every three days,” the man said. “No hope of waiting them out, I’m afraid. They stagger their sleep so one or two are always awake.”

“Oh.” Palja had no idea what a morgle was, but presumably the man meant the white monsters nearby.

“Don’t worry, this section of the tunnels is safe. Here’s a map.” The man held it up. “The morgles travel through these three places—their territory is quite small. Voices carry down here and make them sound much closer than they are. But they never come down here.”

Palja looked more closely at the map. It was a detailed blueprint of the ruins, showing areas even deeper than this one. “You made this?”

“That’s right. Every bit I saw with my own eyes, so you know it’s accurate. My muscles ain’t what they used to be, but these peepers are sharp as ever.” The old man blinked his eyes rapidly. Palja couldn’t imagine a man this old traversing a place with such terrifying monsters.

“You’re freezing cold!” exclaimed the man. “How long have you been sitting here? Come with me and warm up.” He turned, his handful of flames wavering as he walked down the path. Palja hesitated for a moment, but the aroma of spices made up his mind for him. He was so hungry that the smell alone caused his stomach to growl violently.

They turned a corner and, amid a pile of rubble, came upon a simple cooking stove atop a Flame Stone. These magical items could ignite a fire anywhere the user desired. On top of the stove sat an earthen pot. Steam wafted from it, filling the room with warmth and a delicious smell.

“I can have some?” Palja asked.

“Why else would I bring you with me?”

The old man picked up a lamp from beside the stove and transferred the fire from his hand into it. The lamp must have been magical, because as soon as the flames caught, they grew large and bright enough to light the whole room. The man lifted the lid from the pot, which released more of the wonderful smell. He scooped the contents onto a plate, drew a spoon from his bag, and handed both to Palja.

It was some sort of grain boiled with mushrooms and thin slices of meat, seasoned to a spicy flavor. Palja shoveled it into his mouth, uncaring how hot it was. He identified the taste of piperis, a seasoning that stimulated hunger and bloomed flavor, alongside a stamina-enhancing herb. The meat tasted like it had been cooked in butter. Combined with its natural fat, it was nearly too much for Palja's stomach. He mixed it deep into the grain and then took another hearty bite.

"This is delicious! Grandpa, this is the best thing I've ever tasted!"

The old man laughed. "Anything tastes good when your gut is that empty."

"I mean it! What kind of meat is this?! It's so juicy, I've never had anything like it!" Palja talked through a mouthful of food.

The old man chuckled and gave him a mischievous smile. "Why, it's morgle meat."

"Morgle? Sounds familiar... What is it?"

"Oh, you don't remember? Look, there's one over there." The old man pointed, and Palja followed his gaze to the carcass of a pure white monster with a gaping mouth. Its six legs had been torn off at the joints and hung from the ceiling.

"Huh? Huh? *Huh?! Y-you can eat that?! I mean...I ate that?!*" The knowledge that he'd dined on an enormous creature with a messed-up mouth terrified him. He didn't want to believe it, but why would the old man lie?

"You don't want it anymore?"

"Y-you should have let me mentally prepare myself! How'd you catch one of those anyway?"

Palja's stomach growled. His face burned at the timing.

"Want another bowl?"

"U-um, yes, please."

Palja ate five bowls, cleaning out the whole pot. The old man watched him with a huge grin on his face. It wasn't until Palja had eaten his fill and was setting his bowl down on the floor that he realized the old man hadn't gotten a single bite.

"I'm so sorry, Grandpa! I'm so sorry. I promise I'll pay you back as

soon as I find my way out of here!”

“Don’t worry about it,” the old man said. “I can gather my own spices and grains, and there’s plenty of monsters to hunt.”

“Hunt? Here? Don’t tell me you’re going mushroom-picking in such a dangerous place?!”

The old man laughed heartily but didn’t answer him. “By the way, friend, did you come here alone?”

“No, but my friends escaped. What about you?”

“I’m on my own. I used to travel all over the world hunting monsters, until I retired here.”

“Really? Wait, those morgle monsters...” Palja couldn’t believe that the old man had hunted those morgles all on his own. He hadn’t been able to bring one down with two companions to back him up.

“Come along, lad. I’m sure your friends are worried about you. Once you’ve regained your strength you should join them.”

Palja shook his head. “I don’t know the way. I’ll have to go back through morgle territory, won’t I?”

“Just run straight past them. Take a look at the map and memorize your way out.”

Palja hesitated. The morgles were nightmarish in his memory, their skin so tough that a sword couldn’t pierce it, their fangs sharp enough to shear through solid rock.

“Don’t worry,” said the old man. “I’ll follow behind and make sure you reach the exit.”

“That’s, um, kind of you,” Palja said doubtfully. He figured the only way this old man could hunt morgles was with a snare, but he seemed confident enough.

Palja took his advice and memorized the path, before picking up a borrowed lamp—an ordinary one, as the enchanted lamp was too bright and would draw too much attention. Palja had dropped his own lamp in the panic after entering the ruins.

When they were ready, Palja began running as fast as he could towards the exit.

*“Mooo, moooo!”*

*“Moooo!”*

The morgles screamed. Palja realized the only footsteps he heard were his own. He'd been so caught up in his fear, so frantic to find his way, that he hadn't checked up on the old man behind him.

Panic struck. On the verge of turning back, he heard a heavy tread behind him. Morgle footsteps...and more than one set.

“Waaaaaaaahhh!” Palja threw the lamp aside and ran as fast as he could, screaming at the top of his lungs.

A glimmer of light shone at the end of the tunnel. The two other members of Nothomb Gladiators were there, huddled and trembling, a lamp clutched between them. They were here to rescue Palja, but the sound of the morgles had rendered them too frightened to continue.

“P-Palja!”

“Palja, you're alive!”

Palja was so relieved to be reunited with his friends that all the tension left his body, and he collapsed on the spot. Remembering the morgles were hot on his trail, he gasped. Miraculously, the sound of the footsteps grew distant.

“Thank goodness! Let's get out of here!”

“Wait!” Palja took the lamp from his comrades and swung around, illuminating the way he'd come. He couldn't be sure, but he thought he saw the gleam of a sword in the darkness.

“Huh?”

It happened in a split second. The old man, surrounded by three morgles, leapt up and bounded off the narrow corridor walls. He forced the morgles to tangle themselves up by leaping to and fro. Red lines scored across them, and then they collapsed in a heap.

What was strangest of all was that Palja heard nothing. Not the sound of the old man's feet on the stone, nor his sword as it struck. The only noise was the thud as the morgles hit the ground. Palja was a swordsman himself—he knew this old man's technique was otherworldly. He'd never seen anything like it.

“What's wrong, Palja? Stop standing around! What're you waiting for?” Palja's friends grabbed him by the shoulder. He blinked, turning briefly to look at them.

“Hang on a second.” He glanced hastily back down the corridor, but there was nothing there. The hall was silent and empty. “Grandpa? Are you there?”

No answer.

“Palja, what is wrong with you? You’re acting so weird. Did you start hallucinating in there?”

Palja shook his head. “There was a little old man back there... He saved me. I have to thank him.”

“You can’t. I’m telling you, you’re hallucinating! Hey, Celt, help me drag him outta here! If those white monsters come back, they’ll make us their dinner.”

“He’s right, Palja,” said Celt. “Let’s go. It’s too dangerous down here.”

His friends grabbed his lamp and dragged him to the entrance.

“No, I have to wait for Grandpa!”

“Snap out of it! Are you delirious from hunger, is that it? We’ll hurry back to town and eat. We’re just not ready for this place yet,” one of his friends said, before he noticed how swollen Palja’s stomach was.

“Hm? What the heck did you eat?”

“What? Um...morgle.”

“What is that?”

“Those white monsters. You put them in a pot and add spices and rice and boil it all together.” Palja was being completely serious, but his friends reacted like he was cracking up.

“You ate those monsters? C’mon, that sounds disgusting. You must be seriously ill. Celt, help me with him.”

The three of them chatted on their way back to the nearby town. Palja was unable to forget the taste of the morgle risotto the old man had made him for a long, long time. He went from town to town in search of a similar flavor, but he never found it.

No one knew what happened to Anise Howgley or where he’d gone. His exploits were so exaggerated that no one could discern which stories were true. However, in every version, he was described as a man of short stature, an eccentric gourmand, and a skilled swordsman capable of terrifying, silent speed.



## Afterword

**H**ELLO, IT'S THE AUTHOR, Necoco! Thanks so much for buying Volume 4 of *Dragon Hatchling*! Looking back on it now, I can't believe a whole year has passed since Volume 1 was published. Time flies, doesn't it? I appreciate you so much for sticking with me this past year!

This volume covers the second half of the Harunae Desert saga. Our protagonist faces off against the "hero," encountering setbacks, leveling, and victory. This volume ended up being longer than I intended, so I had to do some serious revising.

I left in all the major events and trimmed some non-essential parts to make it all fit in one volume. Cutting out too much of the action and emotions makes it feel too abrupt, though, so the majority of things that I removed were the protagonist's silly thoughts and jokes. As much as I enjoy myself while writing them, when I re-read it I think "Whoa, I can't keep that in," and it ends up on the cutting-room floor.

So if you're reading it and shaking your head at one of the protagonist's jokes, remember that it was one I kept after careful scrutiny and revision. I think that's vital to keep in mind, don't you? Goodness, what in the world am I even writing about...?

Someone on my team suggested cutting the red ant storyline. Not all of it, but essentially their issue was that there were too many red ants in the story.

"He jumps into an ants' nest to escape from the giant centipede but ends up getting ganged up on. Then he narrowly escapes."

"He fights a squad of red ants in order to get them to take the poisoned meatballs home."

"He jumps into the ants' nest to fight the weakened ants so he can level up and evolve."

"He needs to level more after he evolves so he meets with the queen and negotiates with her."

"They agree that he will invade an enemy ants' nest and then destroys it."

Those are the five main plot points involving the battle with the

ants. Although when he enters the nest again after he evolves, it's more of a war of words than a physical battle.

So when they said I needed to cut something, I couldn't choose between them. I thought my editor had a point, and I fully intended on omitting at least one of those scenes; I actually got many comments when these chapters were published online to the tune of, "How long is he going to waste time playing with ants while Nina is in danger?"

But when it came down to picking something to omit, I couldn't bring myself to do it. It was an emotional thing; re-reading everything made all of those plot points seem necessary to me, or else they had interesting parts in them that I didn't want to take out. That was my reasoning. When they suggested I could keep those plot points if I cut out other smaller scenes, I didn't want to cut those, either. I write scenes because I think they're fun, so maybe it's natural that I wouldn't want to get rid of them.

All this is to say that I didn't cut any scenes. Or wait, maybe one... Nope, on second thought, I don't think I cut anything. I'm not positive that I kept every single thing, but I know all the scenes themselves were kept. I did shorten certain sections and write them more concisely to get under the maximum word limit. Thanks to that effort, it's much easier to read than it was in the web version, with a much smoother flow.

It was suggested that I divide the Harunae saga up into three volumes, but the middle volume would be nothing but stories about hunting ants. I just didn't have the courage to do that. It would make for a funny story, but that's all.

Also, since it's been a year since the first volume was published, that means it's been one year since I got my avocado tree—the one I talk about briefly in these afterword sections—and I'm happy to report: It's still alive. Back in the afterword of the third volume I told you how I neglected it and didn't water it for a month. All its leaves fell off, and I thought it was totally on its last legs, but strangely enough they all grew back.

I'm not sure if it'll make it through the winter this year, though. I'm sure that'll be a big challenge. Its leaves are yellowed right now, perhaps because the cold got to it. Someone told me it might be because I only watered it once every two months. I wonder if I need to plant it in the ground now... If there were laws against plant abuse, I'd already be in jail. I think I heard about a plot like that in an old science fiction

novel, although I never read it myself. Scary.

Looking out at my yellowed avocado tree on the balcony,

—NECOCO

*Best regards, and I hope  
we can stay in touch.*





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